The Meaning of Poverty

Perspectives from a Scottish housing estate

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Abstract

While much poverty research has concentrated on the definition and measurement of poverty, the primary concern of this thesis is the meaning of poverty in contemporary society. It is suggested that, while existing research describes the conditions and hardships that people experience in poverty, much less attention is given to how they make sense of and respond to these conditions. This thesis attempts to address this issue by exploring the narratives of people living on an urban council housing scheme, a group who tend to be regarded by the rest of society as poor and socially excluded.

The first part of the thesis examines the subjective definitions and conceptions of poverty held by local residents. It finds that local residents generally resist the idea that they are poor. In their own accounts, they emphasise their personal capacity and scope for control, rather than the constraints that they face. The research goes on to ask: what is it about the experience of people in these areas and their understanding of the meaning of poverty which makes them deny that they are poor? For those interviewed, poverty is interpreted at a personal level as a form of identity associated with a lack of agency. People are identified as poor not by their material circumstances alone, but by their inability to cope with and remain on top of conditions of material hardship. It is in this context that respondents stress their ability to manage and overcome the difficulties they face and by this means seek to demonstrate their personal competence and moral adequacy.

In the second part of the thesis, the relationship between poverty, agency and identity is explored with respect to the community and local people's involvement in community action. Two distinct discourses on poverty are identified in the accounts of local residents active in local groups and organisations. An exclusive discourse of poverty identifies poor people as a distinct social group by reference to their weakness, demoralisation and dependent status. Local activists experience this discourse as exclusionary and disempowering. However, a more inclusive discourse on poverty is apparent in the accounts of some activists which links the experience of poverty to more positive forms of collective action and mutual support developed in the community. This discourse is compatible with a conception of people as social agents, actively involved in maintaining their welfare in conditions of relative material deprivation.

The thesis raises questions about the ways in which poverty is understood in different contexts and by different groups. It also reveals the problematic nature of poverty discourse for individuals who experience material hardship or belong to groups identified as poor. It is the struggle to maintain a positive self-conception in the light of negative meanings conveyed through poverty discourse that emerges from this study. An important aspect of community-based activity is the rejection of a stigmatised identity as poor people which reduces people to the status of social objects. By contrast, the construction of a more positive social identity emphasises their actions as subjects. The thesis concludes by suggesting that greater attention needs to be given to the social meanings and forms of categorisation involved in defining people as poor. It is proposed that future research should attempt to identify different kinds of poverty discourse and how these relate to particular conceptions of poverty and social perceptions of poor people.

Declaration

Except where specific reference is made to other sources, the work in this thesis is the original work of the author. It has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other degree.

Ian Stone

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The personal meaning and experience of poverty

This study looks at the experience of poverty for people on a council housing scheme and addresses itself to the question of what it means to be poor. In particular, it examines how personal experience and human agency are represented in accounts of poverty. It will argue that in many studies of poverty it is the constraints and deprivations endured by poor people that are emphasised; individuals hardly figure at all and rarely as social agents capable of acting to maintain and improve their well-being. Instead, poverty is frequently regarded as something that befalls people as a result of certain precipitating events or occurrences and affects those whose access to resources and opportunities is constrained by their social position and circumstances. It argues further that the emphasis given to defining poverty as an income condition has led to a neglect of the subjective and non-material aspects of poverty and the social meanings attached to being poor in society.

My task in this thesis is to develop an account of poverty which gives greater emphasis to its meaning for people and to issues of subjectivity, identity and agency. The general approach is interpretive and exploratory with an emphasis on people's own accounts of their day-to-day lives, their strategies, their self-conceptions and their understanding of what it means to be poor. The study focuses on the personal accounts of residents of a deprived council housing scheme collected through in-depth interviews. Where it departs from other studies is in its treatment of these accounts not as detailed reports of the conditions and deprivations experienced by people in poverty, but as narratives in which subjects attempt to negotiate an acceptable identity and self-image. I shall argue that through their accounts, much is revealed about what it means to be poor and how poor people are constructed through discourses of poverty.

My discussion of poverty over the following chapters will show how subjective definitions of poverty are related not simply to the existence of particular social and material circumstances but to cultural representations of poverty and poor people in society. I look at two aspects of this. In the first part of the study I focus on the self-

conceptions of people commonly identified by others as poor: how they perceive their situation, the difficulties and constraints that they face and the resources, strategies and opportunities available to them. For those in the study, the need to maintain their self-respect and dignity arises from the internalisation of a conception of poverty which interprets economic insufficiency and material hardship as signs of failure and inadequacy. In the second half of the thesis, I turn my attention to the meaning of poverty at the level of the community. The role of community-based action is discussed and conceptualised in terms of the subjective, cultural and non-material aspects of poverty identified by respondents.

The background to the study

My interest in this topic grew out of my personal experience of working with individuals and groups in situations of material deprivation while engaged as a youth and community worker on a housing scheme in Glasgow. What struck me when I later came to study poverty was the gap between the way in which poverty was discussed and conceptualised as an issue of social policy and my personal contact with individuals who might be perceived as poor, because they lived on a run-down housing scheme, were unemployed, were single-parent mothers or in low-paid work. In many cases, discussions of poverty in an academic context seemed a world away from the personal lives and experiences of these people. The emphasis on defining poverty as a social condition and documenting the material hardships and social deprivations endured by those in poverty revealed little or nothing about the perceptions, experiences and strategies of those individuals referred to as 'poor'. In practice, it was often difficult to establish whether particular individuals or groups were to be regarded as 'poor' and which specific aspects of their situation made them so.

Poverty research in Britain has been dominated by a concern with quantification, statistical techniques and appropriate income levels. Much of this research has concentrated on establishing an objective basis to defining and measuring poverty which is grounded in the material conditions of individuals and households. This has been important in moving discussions of poverty away from prejudicial and pejorative notions of poor people. But in some ways, it has tended to limit our understanding of poverty. Categorising people as poor in terms of some level of income, material living standards or social exclusion tells us little about what people

experience in poverty. Nor does it provide an understanding of the various factors which mediate the experience of poverty over time. The reliance on such categories may therefore give the impression that poverty can be conceptualised in terms of a set of uniform outcomes experienced by poor people as a result of their lack of income or material resources.

Discussions on poverty frequently make reference to those in poverty as 'poor people' or simply 'the poor'. However the use of such labels adds to the impression that poverty is confined to a particular section of the population rather than being a condition that many ordinary people experience at some point in their life-time. The reliance on definitions which have their emphasis on establishing a clear line of division between a state of poverty or not, may further reinforce the impression that those defined as poor exist as a distinct social group of the population. My concern was that the effect of this was to imply that the issue of poverty could be addressed by pin-pointing those who were poor and directing forms of social action and welfare towards these groups in order to help them out of poverty and reintegrate them back into society. A more likely consequence of such policies would be the maintenance of a section of the population in a dependent position, thus reinforcing the perception of poverty as a problem of poor people.

My interest in the experience of poverty was also prompted by the emphasis in recent popular and academic literature on the growth of persistent forms of poverty. Various social and economic processes, including the rise in mass unemployment, the decline of the welfare state, the restructuring of the economy and employment opportunities, had given rise to the perception that large numbers of the population were now shut outside of society and trapped in poverty. New discourses on poverty based on the notions of social exclusion, 'new poverty' and the emergence of an 'underclass' all supposed the existence of a growing fringe of people excluded from the mainstream of their societies. The suggestion was that new and distinctive forms of poverty had arisen in the 1980s and 90s, with those in poverty emerging as the permanent casualties of a process of structural marginalisation and increasing social polarisation.

The significant point about these discourses was the treatment of poverty as closely associated with those occupying particular socio-economic positions, rather than as a condition of economic insufficiency defined by reference to objective measures. Again, the effect of this was to strengthen the view of poverty as a fixed status for

many people. Poverty was equated with the inferior status and social position of those trapped on benefits, residing on poor housing schemes, excluded from the labour market or in insecure employment, or living in single-parent households. From this point of view, the issue of persistent poverty was perceived not simply as matter of material hardship and lack of income, but constructed through references to poor people's social exclusion and alienation, their dependence on welfare, their low expectations and self-esteem and their lack of opportunities for economic advancement. The meaning of poverty was therefore underpinned by a notion of poor people as a residual population, detached from the mainstream of life, marginalised from the labour market and concentrated in deprived urban areas.

A further aspect of these discourses which related poverty to processes of marginalisation and exclusion, was an imagery of place that provided a social and spatial dimension to the experience of poverty. It was the image of the run-down council housing scheme and its beleaguered inhabitants that appeared above all to signify the exclusion and marginalisation of those trapped in poverty. Associated with high and long-term unemployment and a population largely dependent on social benefits, the deprived housing scheme became fixed in the popular consciousness as the location of those for whom poverty was a permanent condition. The overwhelmingly negative effects of living in such areas were seen to lock residents in a culture of poverty and dependency from which they were powerless to escape. As contemporary symbols of social polarisation and exclusion, these places appeared to confirm the existence of a section of the population cut adrift. They came to symbolise the notions of an underclass and a dependency culture.

My overall concern was that these ideas helped reinforce the perception of poverty as an inevitable and unchanging state of affairs for many individuals and groups. In emphasising the structural and cultural forces that kept people in poverty and the limits placed on their capacity to act independently of these constraints, the poor emerged as hopelessly stuck in poverty. Their role as subjects or agents was minimised. Their individual experience and actions were subsumed within a category of poor people constructed through images and stereotypes that placed them in a particular relationship with the rest of society. This was especially so where poor people were regarded as the victims of social and economic processes that trapped them in poverty, confined them to run-down housing schemes and deprived them of the living conditions, opportunities and life-styles enjoyed by others. Regardless of whether they were pitied, blamed or treated as deviant and

threatening, they appeared to have little choice but to submit to this hopeless state of affairs.

Re-introducing 'the poor' as the subjects of research

What was absent from this perspective was an indication of how people themselves experienced and responded to their disadvantaged position in the labour market, the housing system and so on. There was little discussion of the experiences and interests of those characterised as poor, excluded or an underclass, nor of their scope for action as individual and collective agents. It was unclear whether these individuals shared the view of themselves as cut adrift and permanently trapped in poverty. It might well be that despite their relative lack of resources they saw themselves as full and active members of society rather than locked in a vicious circle that confined them to a separate existence on the fringes of society. Even where individuals appeared to experience poverty as a long-term condition, it was not necessarily the case that they felt themselves socially excluded and marginalised or reduced to a sense of hopelessness and despair.

My decision to focus on the experience of poverty was intended to meet the need for empirical data that incorporated the subjective reality of individuals identified as poor. The aim was to give primary attention to people's own self-conceptions and their perceptions of their scope for agency and the constraints that they faced. The research was therefore planned with the following objectives in mind: first, to analyse the relationship between particular events and circumstances associated with the experience of material deprivation and people's subjective assessments of their well-being; second, to look at how the experience of poverty was mediated by personal agency, particular coping strategies and abilities, the availability of different kinds of resources and access to informal networks and relationships; and finally, to understand and locate the experience and perceptions of specific individuals in the context of broader social and economic processes and the social meanings of poverty in society.

The scope of this study extends beyond a concern with the subjective perceptions, definitions and experiences of material hardship described by individuals. It addresses a number of more general issues concerning the way in which people are categorised as poor and the social meanings conveyed through the use of the term.

One of the key findings of the study is that the identification of individuals and groups as 'poor' is in itself problematic. It takes little account of the social meanings attached to being poor and how these assign 'poor people' a particular social identity and position. An important objective of the study is therefore to draw attention to and investigate the source of dissonance between the identification of people as poor in terms of their income, employment status or living standards and people's own self-conceptions, which may reject such categorisation. It is with this in mind that the subjects of the study are not referred to as 'poor', even where their income or material circumstances appear to indicate a state of poverty.

The design of the study

The study was designed to throw light on these issues by collecting biographical data on the experiences and circumstances of specific individuals living in a single area. My decision to locate the study in a deprived council housing scheme was intended to reflect the common perception of people within these areas as poor. Poverty in this case was closely linked to the identification of residents as a social problem group requiring particular forms of social intervention. One effect of this was that the area had become the focus of a range of strategies and initiatives intended to counter the problems as perceived by others. It had also given rise to a large number of community-based projects and initiatives in the locality. I wanted to learn how residents understood and made sense of their individual circumstances and the factors they identified as important in maintaining a sense of well-being. In this respect, I was keen to assess the significance of local social relations and the role of local community groups and organisations in mediating local people's experience of poverty.

The fieldwork was undertaken in two stages. The first stage comprised a set of in-depth interviews with local residents who were contacted with the help of local community groups. The second stage, which focused on the meaning of poverty at the level of the community, was defined only after the first set of interviews had been completed and analysis of the data had taken place. These initial interviews attempted to identify periods of poverty in people's lives, their causes and their duration. Of particular interest was the question of whether those interviewed were experiencing long-term poverty, how this differed from shorter spells of poverty and what factors other than income were significant. The analysis of these interviews

centred on the relationship between people's subjective experiences and perceptions of their living standards, constraints and opportunities and the nature of their objective circumstances, including the periods of material deprivation experienced at different times in their lives.

The decision to conduct a second set of interviews with local community activists was an attempt to broaden the study and gain an additional perspective by focusing on how poverty was understood at the level of the community. These interviews explored what it meant to be identified as members of a poor community and the scope that activists saw for improving local people's circumstances through individual and collective action. The focus on community action is developed as a means of illustrating and exploring the meaning of poverty as a form of social identity at a collective rather than a personal level. In this respect, I take up some of themes and issues identified during the first set of interviews, such as the place of agency within conceptions of poverty, and apply these to an understanding of the role and significance of community-based activity.

The research process - change and development over time

On the face of it, the experience of poverty seemed a straightforward subject for study. However, various problems emerged in attempting to apply the concept of poverty in the context of a study that engaged people as the subjects rather than the objects of research. These difficulties arose partly due to the inability to establish a clear basis for identifying poverty in the lives of those I interviewed. This undermined the attempt to relate experiences of poverty to particular events, occurrences and conditions. Evidence of poverty as an income condition was often apparent, but there was some doubt as to whether this constituted an experience of poverty and if so, when this began and how long it lasted. This was especially so given the great variation in respondents' personal situations, resources and coping strategies. In the absence of a clear, universally recognised definition of poverty, it became clear that in everyday life, the assessment of people's circumstances as poor was often made on the basis of various social meanings and cultural images of poverty rather than by reference to objective criteria.

As a result, my initial interviews shed more light on the variety of conceptions of poverty held by respondents than on their experience of poverty. Subsequently, the

study became chiefly concerned with the meaning of poverty - both as it related to people's understanding of their own lives and to their understanding of what it meant to be included within the notion of a poor community. Having put aside the attempt to define poverty as a social condition, I felt encouraged to undertake a critical analysis of the processes by which people were identified as poor and the meanings conveyed through this labelling. By examining how the terms poverty and poor were constructed in people's accounts and applied in relation to their own lives and those of other people, it was possible to gain a sense of what it meant to be poor. In this way I began to look more closely at the social and cultural meanings embedded in popular representations of poverty and how these were conveyed and sustained through discourses of poverty.

A second major problem that influenced the course of the research was the practical difficulty of finding sufficient number of people willing to participate in the study. After several months of fieldwork, it became clear that my attempts to contact participants through engaging the help of local organisations were no longer bearing fruit. By this time, however, certain themes and patterns in the data had been established which appeared to weaken the argument for carrying out more of the same interviews. The decision to undertake a second set of interviews with local community activists was therefore made on both pragmatic and theoretical grounds. These interviews examined the engagement of local residents in forms of collective action and their understanding of community-based groups and initiatives as a response to poverty in the locality. This provided an opportunity to use the analytical framework developed in the first stage of the study to explore the relationship between poverty and agency in the context of the local community.

I do not hide the fact that the research departed somewhat from my original, proposal. The major themes and issues explored in this study were identified only after the initial data had been produced and analysed. I believe that telling the 'story' of the research and revealing the various difficulties encountered and the shifts in direction that took place, are important aspects of explaining one's findings and conclusions. A series of unexpected findings and the need to overcome certain conceptual and empirical difficulties encountered during the practical stages of the research prompted a re-examination and revision of the original research design. In this way, the study evolved from an exploratory study of the subjective experience of poverty to a critical study of the social and cultural meanings attached to being poor

in contemporary society from the perspective of individuals and groups identified as poor.

Organisation of the thesis

In the following two chapters, the theoretical and methodological issues underpinning the research are discussed in detail. Chapter 2 considers the theoretical and social basis of definitions of individuals and groups as 'poor'. When people are identified as poor, what is suggested about their relation to and difference from other people classified as non-poor?

The chapter starts by examining various attempts to define poverty as an income condition and more broadly, as a social condition embracing a range of subjective and social effects. It also examines how individuals and groups are identified and represented as poor in various cultural and theoretical accounts of poverty and how these are based on particular explanations of how people become poor and why they remain in poverty. Contemporary discourses on poverty that employ the notions of an underclass or a new poor are reviewed. It is suggested that these have played a significant role in constructing social attitudes towards the poor, although there is little empirical evidence to back the claim that new forms of poverty now exist. Finally, I consider approaches to the study of poverty that focus on the experience of poverty at the level of the individual and the community. The chapter concludes by outlining the need for research that focuses on the perceptions and understandings held by those who are identified as being in poverty.

Chapter 3 presents the initial research aims and objectives and addresses the practical and methodological issues involved in conducting the research. The first part of the chapter describes the design of the research, the format of the interviews and the selection of the area and the people for the study. I consider the possibility of bias in the selection of subjects and the implications of carrying out research in a 'poor' locality. I then discuss some of the practicalities and problems encountered in carrying out the fieldwork and the short-comings and limitations of the data collected from the interviews. I explain how the early findings of the study raised questions about the conceptual and theoretical basis of the study and how this led to a re-assessment and revision of the original research aims. One of the main effects of this was the decision to treat people's accounts as narratives and morality tales rather

than as factual reports of their lives in poverty. Finally, I describe the process of qualitative data analysis and look at some issues concerning the validity and generality of the findings raised in the study.

Chapter 4 describes the first phase of the research, based on interviews conducted with local residents. Analysis centres on the link between people's accounts of their changing social and material circumstances and their subjective perceptions of being poor. I look in detail at how subjects represent their lives in their accounts, how they speak about the material difficulties and constraints that they face, the changes in their circumstances over time and factors that affect their sense of well-being. I also examine how they understand and use the term poverty in speaking about their own lives and those of other people. Above all, I attempt to explain a number of paradoxes that emerge in their accounts. Why is it that most of those interviewed refer to periods of insufficient income and material hardship and yet deny that they are poor? Why do respondents emphasise their sense of personal autonomy, agency and control despite the constraints that they face and in contradiction to the more usual depiction of poverty as a demoralising and incapacitating experience?

Chapters 5 and 6 cover the second stage of the research and considers the views of local residents involved in various community groups and organisations. Interviews with local activists were conducted in an attempt to understand the role and significance of community-based action in relation to local people's experience of poverty. The focus therefore shifts from the personal experience of poverty to the identification of poverty at the level of the community and the meaning and significance of community activity for those who are involved. The accounts of local community activists highlight the importance of non-material aspects of poverty that are concerned with questions of identity, social position, self-respect and worth.

Chapter 5 looks at community activists' accounts of the locality and reveals their understanding of the forms of identity and social relationships associated with residence in a poor locality. It is demonstrated that local activists involved in community-based organisations share similar concerns and recognise the same social meanings in relation to poverty as individuals interviewed about their personal lives and experiences in the first part of the study. Their understanding of what it means to be poor derives from an exclusive discourse on poverty that centres on the identification and characterisation of individuals and groups as poor people. Their own discourses establish forms of identity among local residents that highlight their

role as social agents and avoid reducing them to a category associated with helplessness, deviance or inadequacy.

In chapter 6, I discuss how local activists view their own identity and role within the community and the forms of group identification, common interests and collective consciousness that they assume in their references to the local community. Finally, I look at how different frameworks of belief concerning the nature of poverty and the local community give rise to different rationales for community-based action. Although quite different interpretations of community action are described by local activists, there is an underlying concern that local residents should be recognised as subjects who play an active role in maintaining their welfare and not treated simply as objects of social intervention. At the heart of community action is the objective of increasing local people's welfare in ways that do not take away their self-respect and dignity.

In the final concluding chapter of the thesis I attempt to draw together the findings of the study and to demonstrate their wider importance in relation to social policies aimed at tackling the causes and consequences of poverty in society. It is concluded that policies directed at specific groups or particular areas designated as poor or deprived may be based on a misconception of the nature of poverty. Furthermore, the emphasis given in this study to questions of identity, dignity and self-respect suggests that policies to tackle poverty should recognise the subjective and social elements of people's welfare. Future research should pay more attention to the linkage between objective definitions of poverty and the employment of discourses that construct poor people as a real, static and separate group of the population. This has important implications in terms of the evaluation of current policies and the formulation and design of future policy goals in relation to poverty.

One further point that should be noted is that in order to protect the identity of those who participated in the study, all personal and place names have been altered. The respondents have each been given a pseudonym that has been used throughout the text. On some occasions, personal details have been changed where it was thought that these might identify a respondent. Where extracts from the interviews are quoted, the following conventions have been used. The researcher's words have sometimes been included and these appear in italics; ... denotes a brief pause; [...] indicates that a short section of text has been omitted.

Chapter 2. The meaning of poverty: theoretical perspectives, social categories and the experience of poverty

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with how poverty is perceived, conceptualised and researched as a social problem and how individuals and groups are identified as poor. It looks at the various definitions, accounts and images that lay behind different conceptions of poverty and how these shape ideas about who is poor and what people experience in poverty. It argues that the dominant paradigm of poverty, with its emphasis on defining, quantifying and categorising poverty, does not provide an adequate understanding of how poverty is experienced in the lives of individuals. A more dynamic conceptualisation of poverty is required which takes account of the causes and duration of spells of material deprivation over time and considers the subjective experience and meaning of poverty as perceived by individuals.

In the course of this chapter, I review some of the main empirical and theoretical approaches to the study of poverty. In each case, I look at how poverty is conceptualised as a social problem and the processes and procedures involved in identifying people as poor. In the first section, I discuss conventional approaches to poverty that seek to establish a basis for defining and measuring poverty as an objective condition. I question whether the prominence given to financial and material aspects of poverty has perhaps drawn attention away from more fundamental and complex processes involved in being poor. I then review various popular and theoretical accounts of poverty and look at the ways in which poor people have been constructed and represented in these accounts. In particular, I consider a growing body of literature that suggests that widescale social and economic restructuring has fundamentally changed the nature of poverty, resulting in more persistent forms of poverty and the emergence of an underclass.

In the third section, I attempt to clarify the relationship between the definition of poverty as an analytical category and the experience of individuals placed within this category. I suggest that conceptions and theories concerning the nature of poverty as

a social issue are often unhelpful in understanding the personal lives and experiences of people defined as poor. I also raise as an issue the linkage between the use of the term poverty in an academic context and the meanings conveyed through popular discourses and cultural representations of poverty. It may be the case that the concept of poverty has become so tainted with cultural and ideological meanings that its use in an analytical sense cannot be detached from the legacy of images and ideas attached to being poor. If this is so, the process of identifying people as poor may in itself be stigmatising, regardless of whether this is based on subjective judgements and social ideas about poor people or on objective definitions and measures.

In the fourth section I look at the availability of empirical research that throws some light on how poverty is experienced at the level of the individual or household. I describe the relatively small number of longitudinal or panel studies that provide data on the persistence of poverty and the movement of people in and out of poverty over time. I assess the value of more qualitative data available from small-scale, intensive studies of particular groups or neighbourhoods associated with poverty. These include ethnographic studies of people living in poor neighbourhoods and qualitative studies that concentrate on how poverty affects the lives of particular social groups such as unemployed people, single-parent households or the elderly. Finally, I consider the value of research that explores the nature of the decision-making processes and strategies developed within households in the context of wider social structures and processes.

In the final part of the chapter I set out the need for research that attempts to chart how people experience poverty over time, how they understand and make sense of their situation and the factors, conditions and strategies that play an important part in the maintenance of their welfare. In this respect, I emphasise the importance of understanding poverty at the level of individual experience rather than by reference to the characteristics and conditions associated with the category of poverty. The identification of people as poor in terms of some variable such as income, culture, behaviour or socio-economic position tells us very little about how people actually experience poverty and the varied relationships and strategies through which they manage their everyday life. What is proposed is an in-depth qualitative study that explores the personal and social meanings of poverty and reveals the social forces and practices through which economic insufficiency and material hardship are experienced and managed by individuals.

Defining poverty as a social condition

One of the first things that is apparent about the term poverty is that it contains no single or fixed meaning. It is interpreted in different ways by different people. As Spicker points out, poverty is used to describe the conditions of people in a range of circumstances - it may be used to describe the hungry and starving in the Third world, homeless people sleeping on the streets, a lone mother struggling to make ends meet on benefits or an elderly pensioner, alone, isolated and barely able to heat her home (Spicker, 1993). Given these varied images of poverty, there appear to be no common features or essential defining traits that we can pinpoint as the basis of poverty. Poverty may be described as a lack of income, deprived conditions, lack of opportunities and unmet needs; but none of these various characterisations establish a consistent basis for defining what exactly poverty is and who is poor.

In this section, I look at various attempts to establish an objective definition of poverty. It is not my intention to discuss in detail the complex technical and philosophical arguments that have been generated by the use of different poverty measures. These arguments, which relate to the methods adopted, the selection of particular indicators, the forms of adjustments made and so on, are described elsewhere (e.g. Piachaud, 1987; Desai, 1986; Atkinson, 1985; Donnison, 1988). Here, my aim is to look at the main approaches to defining poverty and the basis on which people are identified as poor and to make some comments about the understanding of poverty conveyed through these definitions. It will become apparent that different positions with regard to the definition of poverty are not simply bound up with the technical issues of measurement; they involve fundamentally different interpretations of the nature of poverty in the context of modern industrial societies.

It was concern about the nature and extent of poverty that prompted early attempts to establish an objective basis to discussions on poverty and to produce a standard that would allow the term to be applied in a clear and consistent manner. Beginning with the early pioneering studies of Booth and Rowntree towards the end of the last century, the establishment of an objective definition of poverty has been seen as an essential prerequisite to getting poverty accepted as a social issue. Much research has therefore been directed toward the establishment of a poverty line as a basis for identifying those in poverty. These have frequently (although not always) employed household income as a proxy for poverty so that households having an income on or

below a particular level were regarded as poor. Subsequently, much argument and debate has centred on the choice of indicators and the level at which the poverty line should be set.

Early attempts to develop an objective means of measuring poverty were based on the concept of subsistence. In his classic study of the 'Life and labour of the people in London', at the turn of the century, Charles Booth attempted to collect empirical evidence and devise a method for quantifying the problem of poverty (Booth, 1902). This rested upon the specification of a minimum standard of living and an estimate of the level of income considered necessary to sustain this level of living. It was the first attempt to define poverty in terms of a line of income below which people were considered poor. This was followed by Rowntree's study of poverty in York, which also set out to calculate the level of income required to sustain a minimum level of subsistence (Rowntree, 1901). Like Booth's study, this was based on the harshest interpretation of the essentials a family needed in order to ensure its physical maintenance.

These early studies were influential in establishing the idea of a poverty-line that related to the minimum level of resources required to maintain a household at subsistence levels. Piachaud has used a similar technique to calculate the minimum costs involved in meeting the subsistence of a child and demonstrated that benefit rates were insufficient (Piachaud, 1979). Bradshaw and Morgan's study of households on benefits was based on 'budget standards' which established the levels of income required to meet the costs of a family budget for food, clothing, fuel and so on (Bradshaw and Morgan, 1987). The poverty line adopted in the US in the 1960s was also an adaptation of the Rowntree method (see Orshansky, 1965). Employing a standard of nutritional adequacy defined by experts translated into particular food products, it estimated the minimum costs for families of different types of meeting their most basic needs.

Common to all these approaches is a concern with the maintenance of physical welfare - food, clothing, rent, fuel. The notion of subsistence has frequently been adopted in preference to more relative measures for political and pragmatic reasons. Rowntree, for example, believed that establishing a measure of poverty based on the barest interpretation of minimum needs would free the concept from arguments about the spending priorities and irresponsible spending habits of poor people. It for would therefore reduce the possibility of objections from the better-off. If it could be

demonstrated that people could not possibly meet their most basic needs at this level of income, even if they spent their money in the most efficient manner possible, this helped to strengthen the case for government action.

Rowntree did however devise a second poverty line based on a more generous interpretation of people's needs. His notion of 'secondary poverty' was intended as a more realistic measure that took into account people's social needs and patterns of spending. It therefore contrasted with his definition of 'primary poverty' as the barest minimum needed for survival. In his later studies of poverty carried out in 1936 and 1950, he again modified the poverty line in ways that reflected his assessment of people's social needs at the time he was writing. (Rowntree, 1941 and 1951). While it is tempting to see these definitions as supporting absolute and relative concepts of poverty, several commentators have argued convincingly that both definitions are consistent with an understanding of poverty as related to needs that are inherently social in nature, rather than as a condition that can be reduced to a set of absolute needs (e.g. Veit-Wilson, 1986).

Definitions of poverty based on the notion of subsistence came under sustained attack in the writing of Peter Townsend in the 1960s and 70s. In his major work, 'Poverty in the United Kingdom', he argued that poverty could be defined in affluent industrial societies only in terms of the concept of relative deprivation (Townsend, 1979). He set about dismantling the idea that poverty could be defined in terms of some absolute level of needs that remained constant over time and across different societies. Instead, he argued that poverty could be defined only in social terms, relative to the normal activities and amenities available to people in society.

> Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. (Townsend 1979, p31)

In the remainder of the book, Townsend set out to define and operationalise the customary life-style of Britain and to translate this into a measure of income needed to ensure a minimum level of participation. This he did by employing initially 60 indicators of deprivation which related to various items and activities ranging from food, clothing, fuel and housing conditions on the one hand to health, family, environment, leisure and social activities on the other. He later narrowed these down to 12 indicators that showed the strongest correlation between income and

deprivation. At a particular point on the income scale, deprivation was found to increase sharply among households. An objective measure of poverty was therefore established at this level of income.

It is noteworthy that despite the radical shift from a subsistence to a relative definition of poverty, there has remained a strong reliance on income-based measures of poverty in order to operationalise the concept. The attempt to reduce poverty to a particular level of income has been common both to definitions of poverty based on the notion of subsistence and those which focus on the ability to participate in the customs, activities, diets, etc. of the majority. Some years ago, the European Commission set out to establish its own poverty standard which could be applied across different countries. This definition rested upon the notion of social exclusion:

> The poor shall be taken to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the Member States in which they live. (Commission of the European Communities, 1989, p9)

The European Commission was keen to operationalise this concept by producing a measure of poverty which would enable comparison of poverty rates across different countries. A poverty standard was adopted at 50% of the average disposable income per equivalent adult in each country concerned. This measure related poverty to the level of inequality in society rather than to some conception of the minimum income needed to ensure a particular level of living standards. Nevertheless, it retained the idea of a poverty line based on a particular threshold of income.

The use of such poverty lines is not without its problems. According to Ringen, the attempt to establish a poverty-line that conveys with accuracy the point at which people move into and out of poverty is fundamentally flawed because it attempts to combine a direct definition of poverty with an indirect method of measurement (Ringen, 1988). His conclusion is that income is in fact a poor guide to whether or not people are experiencing poverty at any particular moment in time.

> The problem with the income-line method, when all is said and done, is that it is an abstract and formal statistical exercise in which little or no consideration is given to how people in fact live. (Ringen, 1988)

The possibility remains of constructing a poverty-line based on a direct measure of people's standards of living rather than using an indirect measure such as household income. A more direct means of assessing whether or not people are experiencing poverty might attempt to look at their actual living conditions and levels of consumption in relation to some assessment of normal standards. Several studies have attempted to do this and claimed that poverty measures based on expenditure and patterns of consumption provide a better indication of who is in poverty than income-based poverty measures (Hutton, 1991; McGregor and Borooah, 1992). Ringen too, favours an approach based on a deprivation rather than an income definition of poverty. He suggests that poverty could be measured by reference to a list of indicators of both social and material deprivation of the kind devised by Townsend (see Townsend, 1987), but without attempting to translate this into an income poverty standard. A poverty-line would then be established on the basis of what people actually consume, measured in terms of various forms of consumption-deprivation.

One attempt to do this was Mack and Lansley's study which used the notion of 'consensual standards' (Mack and Lansley, 1985). The authors attempted to produce a social definition of poverty based on accepted and agreed norms. They asked members of the public to select from a list of items those which they regarded as necessary. From this list, an index of those things considered to be the most essential components of living standards was drawn up and used as the basis for determining whether or not people were poor. In this way, they established a definition of poverty that implicitly recognised the social nature of poverty by applying the standards and norms identified by public opinion. Poverty was defined in terms of the ability to afford three or more items regarded as necessities. But the objectivity of this measure has been doubted by some who argue that there is no clear basis for taking the lack of 3, rather than 4, 5 or 6 items as the poverty standard (see Piachaud, 1987). Furthermore, the study does not establish whether the lack of these items is a function of affordability or choice.

One thing that all of the approaches discussed so far have in common is the tendency to define poverty by reference to the possession of or ability to purchase certain material items. Whether poverty is defined in terms of a particular level of income or more directly, in terms of indicators of deprivation, the use of such measures gives overwhelming emphasis to a view of poverty as an essentially material condition. If poverty is conceptualised as a lack of material goods, however, the implication is

that it can be addressed by bringing the income or living standards of those who are poor up to a level corresponding to the poverty line. Consequently, some writers have attempted to broaden the notion of poverty so that it is viewed not just as a matter concerning the attainment of a certain standard of living but as a more general state of losing out which extends to all spheres of life.

This view seeks to draw attention to the processes by which people are denied access to resources of various kinds. The significance of Townsend's work lies not just in his argument for a definition of poverty based on the concept of relative deprivation. It is the consequences that follow from this view that are important. The understanding of poverty as a relative concept directs attention to the structural aspects of poverty and inequality and the connection between low income and poor health, housing conditions, education and so on. This points to a much broader and multi-faceted concept of poverty in which lack of money represents only one element in a complex of deprivations that make up the experience of poverty.

There have been various attempts to re-conceptualise poverty in terms of social inequality and exclusion. Miller and Roby argue that poverty is inextricably bound to inequality and on this basis define poverty in relation to 6 dimensions of well-being: income, assets and public services, reflecting command over different kinds of resources; and educational and social mobility, power/powerlessness and status and satisfaction (Miller and Roby, 1970). As the conditions of society change, so does the concept of poverty and the specific goods and services that comprise the level of living. According to this argument, poverty is not merely a condition of economic insufficiency but involves social and economic exclusion. To reduce poverty therefore requires much more than an increase in the level of social security. First, it depends on an increase in the political power of those presently excluded because of their poverty. Second, it must be tied to reducing inequality and increasing opportunities for mobility. And finally, it must seek improvements in the level of social provision of goods and services.

Other writers too have argued that modern society requires new and more sensitive instruments to measure poverty, which reflect the emergence of new forms of division and stratification, rather than standards of well-being cast in terms of 19th century concerns about pauperism and physical survival (e.g. Miller and Rein, 1966; Rein, 1970). Miller and Roby argue that the dominance of a concept of poverty based on subsistence has generated an adherence to social indicators and social

policies that are inadequate for the problems generated by inequalities. Their argument rests upon the view that contemporary poverty is no longer simply a matter of economic sufficiency which can be measured according to an income-based poverty standard. For the latter is inextricably tied to historic connotations of subsistence. In their view, poverty in affluent societies is characterised by social division and relative deprivation, "a comparative position of losing out", which is felt in all spheres of life.

Baratz and Grigsby also reject the attempt to reduce poverty to a single indicator in order to provide a more simple method of measurement. Instead, they define poverty as a condition involving severe deprivations and adverse occurrences associated with inadequate economic resources (Baratz and Grigsby, 1972). Income contributes to the condition of poverty, but it does not in itself constitute the condition of poverty. Furthermore, as a measure of poverty it suffers a number of weaknesses. Poverty is therefore conceptualised in terms of a number of income-related deprivations: the lack of physical comfort, health, security, welfare values and deference values. Each of these would have to be included and their relative value weighed in order to create a single index of poverty. Poverty is then viewed as a condition experienced by those who lag behind the rest of society in terms of one or more of these dimensions.

In a more recent version of this argument, George and Howard adopt the view that the constant development of new kinds and levels of need among lower income groups renders subsistence definitions of poverty obsolete (George and Howard, 1991). They suggest that different conceptions of poverty exist along a continuum of want ranging from starvation through to subsistence, social coping and social participation, each based on different views of a person's level of requirements and how well they should be met. Poverty in the 'third world', for example, is characterised by subsistence and starvation. On the other hand, poverty in Britain has declined in terms of starvation and subsistence but has assumed greater importance in terms of social coping and social participation. George and Howard examine a number of different measures and explanations of poverty in relation to various definitions and conclude that poverty in Britain is best defined at the present time in terms of 'social coping'. This involves a poverty standard related to the living conditions in working-class communities, rather than the patterns of consumption and standards of living enjoyed by society as a whole, as proposed by Townsend. This definition has been relatively unexplored partly because it remains unclear how

exactly it can be operationalised in terms of the basic needs and social expectations of working-class communities.

In conclusion, this brief review of the literature has revealed a variety of approaches to defining poverty. A fundamental division was identified between those that view poverty in subsistence terms and those which relate it to the ability to participate in social activities and living standards recognised as normal in society. A further difference in approaches concerned the way in which poverty was operationalised in order to identify how many people are in poverty and which groups are affected. The key difference here is between direct and indirect measures of poverty. The latter frequently employ household income as a proxy for poverty while the former attempt to formulate accurate measures of social and material deprivation in relation to 'normal' living standards. In both cases, there is strong reliance on the idea of a poverty line, which provides a cut-off point between the poor and the non-poor.

A third difference in approaches to defining poverty lay in the conceptualisation of poverty in broad or narrow terms. A narrow conception of poverty focuses on material and financial aspects as the main constituent of poverty. The view of poverty as an essentially material condition is common to both subsistence approaches and to more relative conceptions which examine the components of people's standard of living. A broader conception of poverty sees it more as a social process involving cumulative forms of deprivation and disadvantage that are strongly related to the level of inequality and polarisation in society. This approach seeks to draw attention to other aspects of poverty: the systematic oppression and exclusion of sections of the population, the lack of opportunities, the stigma and status of being poor, the experience of insecurity and powerlessness and so on.

The net result is that there exists no single, widely accepted definition of poverty that can be used with some consistency and credibility. This problem is not peculiar to poverty. When we look at a number of other categories such as unemployment, disability, homelessness, for example, we see that in all cases there is disagreement about the way in which they should be defined. However, in the case of the examples given, it is at least true to say that some kind of legal or institutional definition has been established (notwithstanding disputes about its validity or application), often as a basis for determining eligibility to particular services or resources. There is, by contrast, no accepted definition of poverty in the sense of a

set of criteria used to ascertain a right to services or an obligation for the state to intervene; Being poor is not a state that carries a duty to help.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that the British Government argues that poverty no longer remains a continuing problem of modern societies like Britain. Thus in his 'End of the line for poverty' speech in 1987, John Moore, the Social Security Secretary, attacked the idea that poverty might still exist in Britain - a position that has been similarly adopted by the present Social Security Secretary (e.g. see Guardian, 17 April 1996, 'Poverty, what poverty? says Lilley'). The government produces figures showing 'Households below average income' but strongly denies that these are in any sense a measure of poverty. What is apparent is that the question of how poverty is defined is not a technical issue alone. In practice, its definition is governed by social concerns, cultural values and political considerations.

As academic debate on the issue of defining poverty has become increasingly complex and technical, there is a danger that it becomes more distant from the social concerns and understandings of the majority of people. One writer warns that such discussion is in danger of becoming 'a semantic and statistical squabble that is parasitic, voyeuristic and utterly unconstructive and which treats 'the poor' as passive objects for attention' (Piachaud, 1987). To a large extent, understanding what it means to be poor at the level of the individual has become subordinated to questions of definition. While the latter has been crucial in producing a more objective approach to poverty and a set of measures which enables the changes and patterns over time to be assessed, it has in some ways limited our understanding of poverty. In particular, it tells us little about how poverty is experienced by individuals in their everyday lives, nor how people's circumstances change over time and how they respond to and cope with the conditions that they experience.

Social theories and accounts of poverty

One thing that emerges from the literature reviewed in the preceding section is that underlying different definitions are a number of competing conceptions of poverty. The identification of individuals or groups as poor therefore depends on the particular conception of poverty employed. Poverty has long been a contested notion and research seeking to understand the meaning and extent of poverty cannot avoid engaging in the wider battle to define and set its parameters. In this section, I

examine different accounts, theories and explanations of poverty in order to find out how each understands the nature and meaning of poverty.

The dominance of a tradition of poverty research dedicated to establishing an objective definition of poverty came about as a response to a legacy of shifting ideas, cultural images and social representations of poverty and poor people. The social and ideological construction of poor people has remained a strong component of conceptions of poverty (Himmelfarb, 1984; Mann, 1992). While the particular terms and discourses may have changed over the years, many of the underlying themes and preconceptions remain the same (Katz, 1989). Such ideas have had an important effect in shaping the ways in which poverty has been conceptualised and constructed in popular discourse. Cultural representations of poor people, both old and new, have influenced our understanding of what it means to be poor as well as shaping the actual experiences and perceptions of those in poverty. In this section, I offer a summary of some of the main ideas.

A major feature of social policy concerned with poverty in Britain over the last hundred years or more has been the classification of the poor in relation to various cultural norms and moral values (Macnicol, 1985). This has involved a number of extremely powerful and pervasive ideas based crucially upon an ideological distinction drawn between the deserving and the undeserving poor, the 'respectable' working-class and the 'residuum'. The boundaries between the truly needy and the undeserving have been constantly redrawn throughout history with the latter characterised as a deviant or criminal class outside of normal societal values and immersed in a 'culture of poverty'. These ideas about the poor, their classification into the deserving and undeserving, the individualising of causes and solutions and the construction of social and cultural difference continue to play an important role in shaping our perception of the nature of poverty as a social issue and in the formulation of social policies to tackle poverty (Dean, 1991).

In the changing social and economic context of poverty in the 1980s and 1990s it is interesting to see the re-emergence of the same historical categories and themes that have dominated discussions of poverty in the past. During this period, poverty has become increasingly associated with structural unemployment, reflecting the growing significance of the unemployed in the overall composition of the poor. This has been accompanied by the idea that poverty is now more tenacious and permanent in character for many sections of the population, including single-parent families,

those with disabilities and the long-term unemployed, who are excluded from the labour market. Particular concern has centred on the increasing concentration of persistent poverty in certain deprived inner-city and peripheral estates giving rise to a growing sub-culture of crime, apathy and despair in these areas (Dahrendorf, 1987).

These emerging patterns of poverty are generally associated with the widespread restructuring of the economy that has taken place during the 1970s and 1980s, variously described in terms of a shift to disorganised capitalism, post-fordism, etc. (Lash and Urry 1987; Bauman 1987). This has had a significant effect on the labour market and employment opportunities resulting in the increasing incidence of non-standard, precarious, low-paid and temporary forms of employment as well as high levels of unemployment (Purcell and Wood, 1986; Atkinson, 1987). On the basis of these trends some writers see a process of increasing social division based on a growing polarisation of employment opportunities between 'core' workers, with well-paid, skilled and secure jobs and 'peripheral' workers, with low incomes and insecure prospects and experiencing temporary employment, under-employment, sub employment and unemployment (Boje, 1990; Ashton, 1986 and 1989; Ashton and Maguire, 1991).

Changes in the structure of the labour market and the forms of employment available have coincided with particular social and demographic trends, which have affected the nature of the working and non-working population and the restructuring and contraction of the welfare state, resulting in a reduction in levels of social protection. This has given rise to the perception of an increasingly peripheral group of the population who are denied both effective participation in the labour market and effective citizenship through a set of rights and guarantees established in the welfare state. The emergence of new social problem categories associated with poverty - the homeless, the underclass, the unemployed - both reflects and expresses this relationship between poverty and social polarisation and marginalisation in contemporary society.

Research in recent years has highlighted the importance of space in these processes and its significance as a mediating factor (Byrne and Parson, 1983; Urry, 1985; Massey, 1984). It is argued that patterns of social and spatial polarisation have developed hand in hand during the 1980s so that place of residence now operates as a significant constraint or opportunity for people. Where you live matters and not

just in terms of the significance of local economies and labour markets, as stressed in a number of locality studies (e.g. Cooke, 1989; Urry, Harloe and Pickvance, 1990). Local social and community networks can be a resource for people, opening up informal channels of influence and information and may be crucial to the emotional as well as economic survival of many poor families. At the same time, a high poverty rate across a whole community may restrict the potential for informal activities and employment opportunities.

In examining the factors affecting the experience of poverty over time for people in different household circumstances we are compelled therefore to consider the significance of increasing spatial polarisation and the concentration of low-income groups in particular localities. The peripheralisation of an increasing proportion of the labour force and the growing centre-periphery division in production may be reflected in widening social and spatial segregation of households in contemporary society (Byrne and Parson, 1983). The process of residualisation and recommodification in the public housing sector combined with the structural marginalisation and the weak bargaining position of those now external or peripheral to the labour market have led, it is argued, to an increased correspondence between poverty and council housing and to the spatial concentration of poverty in the peripheral estates (Forrest and Murie, 1983).

A growing number of books and articles throughout the 1980s have attempted to highlight the plight of the poor in this context of increasing inequality and polarisation in living standards, opportunities and life-chances. Research published by campaigning groups like the Child Poverty Action Group has played an important role in countering some of the more pernicious ideas and myths about the poor as a burden on the rest of society, a deviant sub-culture detached from the social norms of behaviour, values and culture, or as a permanent and inevitable minority comprising society's failures and misfits (e.g. Becker, 1991; Oppenheim, 1990). Its research has combined statistical analysis and estimates of the growing incidence of poverty with vivid descriptions of the meagre standard of living and quality of life endured by those in poverty.

Poverty is increasingly defined in these accounts in terms of social exclusion, loss of citizenship and marginalisation (Golding, 1986; Lister, 1990). Thus one commentator refers to poverty as 'exclusion from the evolving opportunities, living standards and life-chances of the average working family.' (Donnison, 1992). In

some European nations the notion of poverty itself appears to have been superseded by growing use of the term social exclusion (Commission of the European Communities, 1989 and 1991). This directs attention towards the processes by which people become trapped in impoverished and unrewarding circumstances, low paid work and unemployment and reliance on second-rate and stigmatising public services. It recognises that a lack of income and material resources represent only one dimension of the problem faced by people in poverty, and shows greater awareness of how social, economic, cultural and psychological processes are inter-related and mutually reinforcing aspects of social exclusion.

There is greater recognition that contemporary poverty is more widespread, persistent and connected to wider social and economic processes in society. The term 'new poverty' is used with increasing frequency in reports and surveys of poverty produced by and for the European Community. It is based on the view that contemporary poverty is both quantitatively and qualitatively different from 'traditional' poverty (Room, 1990; Lawson and Room, 1988; Benington, 1991). There is statistical evidence indicating that a shift has occurred in the distribution of poverty among particular categories of the population. There is some evidence that this is related to changes in employment patterns, recent social and demographic trends and a reduction in levels of social protection available through the welfare state. But while it is acknowledged that poverty now affects a growing number of households, it is less clear exactly how and to what extent the experience of poverty is changing and whether this constitutes a 'new poverty'.

In Britain, discussions of the nature of contemporary poverty and the role of the welfare state have been influenced to a much greater extent by the underclass debate. These ideas derive largely from the United States where the term has been used to express concerns about the moral breakdown and collapse of the family within the black community. In the American literature notions of underclass appear to have their roots in earlier cultural and behavioural explanations of poverty based on the idea that there exists a sub-group of the poor characterised by their welfare dependency, their deviance from social norms and their inability or unwillingness to lift themselves out of poverty (Auletta, 1982; Murray, 1984).

In Britain, the underclass debate has also centred on the links between poverty and social and moral breakdown (Murray, 1989 and 1990). However, discussion about the growth of an underclass has placed a greater stress on the significance of

structural changes and the consequences of increasing social polarisation (Robinson and Gregson 1989 and 1992). The reduction in the opportunities for social mobility faced by those at the bottom of the income scale has led, it is believed, to the permanent social and economic exclusion of some sections of the population (Field, 1989). The condition of long-term poverty experienced by these groups is reinforced and reproduced, it is claimed, by the development of certain values, sub-cultures and responses as a means of adapting to the limited opportunities available to them (Dahrendorf, 1987).

Recent discourses on poverty have therefore been dominated by the claim that contemporary poverty is not only more widespread than in the past but more persistent and distinctive in character. The determinants and the routes into poverty are seen to be different, with new groups of the population affected, new forms and experiences of poverty emerging and spells of poverty becoming longer and more permanent in duration. Many of these notions are shared by those on the left and the right, although each side employs the terms in a distinct way and offers quite different explanatory accounts and social prescriptions. But the overall effect is to link poverty to emerging social problems and forms of deviance identified among certain sections of the population. It is given an added social and spatial dimension through the association with particular depressed neighbourhoods.

However, while there is clear evidence of an increase in the numbers of people in poverty and of the greater significance of the unemployed among the overall population in poverty, there is little empirical research to back many of the assertions made about the link between persistent poverty and widespread social and cultural disaffection. For example there is little information available about how many and which individuals experience conditions of permanent poverty and exclusion, about the nature of the barriers and constraints that they face and the factors that have a bearing on whether they remain in or escape from poverty. This suggests that more large-scale social surveys and longitudinal research into the duration of spells of poverty over time need to be undertaken. It also points to the need for more qualitative research that attempts to trace the effects of these macro-structural processes in the lives, experiences, perceptions and responses of those individuals and households considered most likely to be facing conditions of persistent poverty.

This review of popular and social accounts of poverty reveals another important dimension in understanding poverty: the way in which poverty is constructed as a

social problem. This is less to do with how poverty is defined and the particular criteria used in identifying people as poor and more with the way in which poverty is perceived and described in different social and historical contexts. Ideological and cultural ideas about the nature of poverty and poor people play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of what poverty is and who is poor. They construct certain dominant categories in terms of which poor people are represented - either as deviant, undeserving and unwilling to help themselves or alternatively as dependent, submissive and incapable of helping themselves (Katz, 1989). Popular conceptions of poverty may therefore be based more on cultural images and representations of poor people than on the definitions and conceptions of poverty held by those who research the subject.

Locating the individual in accounts of poverty

The discussion so far has centred on two important areas of debate concerning the issue of poverty: how it is defined as a social condition and how it is constructed as a social problem. An issue that seems to have received much less attention is how changes in the condition and perception of poverty are reflected in the everyday lives and experiences of those most affected and how these people themselves define their situation. There is clearly a need for research which seeks to provide an objective basis to discussions of poverty. The development of broad theories which can identify social trends and emerging patterns of poverty is also important. What seems to missing from the debate on poverty is the understandings, expectations and meanings brought to their situation by those who experience poverty.

As things stand, much of our knowledge of how poverty is experienced relies on extrapolating from definitions of poverty that focus predominantly on economic insufficiency and material hardship. The methods used to acquire data on poverty are generally such that accounts of the subjective experience of poverty are subordinated to questions of definition and issues of quantification, statistical techniques and appropriate income levels. This may imply that those in poverty constitute a separate group of the population defined in terms of the level of social and material deprivation that they endure. What has not been established is whether those who are defined as poor employ the same criteria and distinctions in defining their own situation.

In the preceding section, I also looked at how popular and theoretical accounts of poverty were influential in shaping ideas about what it meant to be poor. I suggested that individuals and groups were identified as poor by reference to various cultural representations and discourses of poverty. Recent accounts of poverty have been dominated by the idea that poverty is more persistent and long-term for some groups of the population. The notions of an underclass or a new poor have reinforced the association of poverty with those seen as marginalised from the labour market, dependent on inadequate and stigmatising forms of welfare and trapped in poor localities plagued by social problems.

What distinguishes the approaches to poverty considered so far is that they are chiefly concerned with the nature of poverty as a social category, defined in terms of income levels, levels of deprivation, socio-economic position. They provide no real understanding of the experiences of individuals who come into or are placed within this category. Instead, the individual's experience of poverty is submerged into the category of poverty. We gain little sense of the processes and circumstances through which people come to be poor, of what poverty means in terms of their personal lives, or of their efforts to change or overcome the causes of poverty. Instead, individuals and groups are swept into various categories of poverty on the basis of their income level or their socio-economic position. Once categorised as poor, the subjective experience of these individuals is assumed to mirror the defining characteristics of the category of poverty (for example, social exclusion, welfare dependency or relative deprivation). There is little in these accounts to suggest that those identified as socially excluded or marginalised might hold a discrepant or conflicting view of their lives.

Thus conceptualisations of poverty in material terms (e.g. economic insufficiency or relative deprivation) become tied to generalisations about 'the poor' as a social category. The result is that a diverse range of people, interests, predicaments and experiences are lumped together under single category on the basis of characteristics of certain groups/categories who may not even be the majority of those in poverty (Katz 1989). Discussion of the experience of poverty in the lives of individuals then proceeds in terms of statements about poor people based on their perceived possession of certain poverty-linked characteristics. This may encourage a view of poor people which both assumes a uniform set of experiences and tends to emphasise their social difference, their confinement within a separate social sphere and their distance form our own lives.

The impression that 'the poor' exist as a separate social group may also be sustained by the language and categories used in academic research on poverty. The use of the terms 'the poor' and 'poor people' to refer to those who are defined as poor may impose a particular identity and social status on those designated as poor who become constituted as a social category and not just an analytical category. This may convey an impression of 'the poor' as a permanent and static group of the population, whereas it seems likely that a high number of people pass within and between the categories associated with poverty (Duncan, 1984). The possibility that spells of poverty are experienced for greater or lesser periods of time by a large proportion of the population and are not exclusive to 'poor people' becomes obscured. Hence, the very language in which discussions of poverty take place may further reinforce the idea that poverty is a fixed and permanent condition experienced by poor people.

This suggests that it is important to differentiate more clearly between the category of poverty and the particular individuals who are placed within the category. Otherwise this gives rise to confusion and misconceptions about the lives of the particular individuals and groups designated as 'poor'. It is not through the objective measures, cultural meanings and social theories which come to define the category of poverty that we can understand experiences of individuals placed within the category. Their experience cannot be defined simply in terms of particular measures and definitions of poverty, whether based on subsistence, financial hardship or relative deprivation. Nor can experience be understood by reference to the economic and social processes seen to define the nature of poverty as a social issue. Neither approach provides an adequate basis for understanding the lives of those who are identified as poor, what they experience and how they perceive and respond to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

We must be clear to distinguish between the category of poverty and the experience of individuals affected by poverty. This can be illustrated by taking a parallel example, old age. The category of old age is defined in terms of physical age. However, it is not physical age *per se* which defines the category, but its association with a significant change in the personal and social circumstances of individuals, which generates particular needs and problems. In the same way, insufficient income is adopted an indicator of the social condition of poverty, but is not its defining feature. But it is the definition of the category in terms of a growing frailty and

reliance on others, inactivity and excess of free time, withdrawal from the labour market and the world of work and access to particular services, social organisations and benefits, which gives rise to a particular social profile of elderly people. This is not to say that all people who reach this age begin to experience the features associated with the category of old age. Only that the probability of experiencing these things rises steeply when this age barrier is crossed. In this respect, we see a clear parallel with the attempt to define a particular threshold of income below which the probability of relative deprivation significantly increases.

However, many people will resist the onset of characteristics associated with old age, remaining active and busy and retaining good health and a sense of independence. Those placed within the category of old age may have a sense of themselves, their identity and self-image, their level of activity and so on which is at variance with the characteristics referred to in defining the category. However, particular aspects of the condition of old age, such as enforced retirement, inevitably have an effect on those who previously derived their identity, status and sense of worth from their work role. A study of the experience of old age in terms of the lives of specific individuals would focus on these processes of change, resistance and self-definition, by understanding the social meanings of old age, the relationship between objective and subjective factors and physical and social dimensions. It would also consider various factors which affected the coping strategies and responses of people in old age - the availability of different kinds of resources, the nature of their social relationships, their previous experiences and circumstances and so on.

Understanding the experience of poverty is a similarly complex and multi-dimensional undertaking which embraces both subjective and objective and material and non-material elements. It is assumed that fundamental to the condition of poverty is a lack of material resources. What is less clear is how this affects people's sense of self, their worth and dignity and their social relationships. When we seek to understand what it means to be poor, we focus on the point where categories of poverty, cultural representations of poor people and personal experience come together in the lives of specific individuals. In looking at the experience of poverty, we are therefore concerned with the relationships between resources and well-being and between structure and agency in the lives of specific individuals. We must consider the subjective, personal and non-material aspects of people's lives as well as the experience of material deprivation. We must also pay attention to the cultural meanings of poverty as well as objective definitions and measures. Finally, we must

consider the nature of people's responses, strategies and resources as well as their social position and socio-economic circumstances.

Studies relating to the individual's experience of poverty

In this section, I look at the availability of empirical research which deals with different aspects of the experience of poverty at the level of the individual and household. First, I discuss longitudinal and cohort studies concerned with the duration of spells of poverty and the determinants of movements into and out of poverty over time. Second, I consider a number of ethnographic studies that focus on geographic communities associated with low income, poverty and deprivation and attempt to describe and interpret the cultural values and beliefs, the actions, relationships and flows of resources among local people. Third, I examine qualitative studies of poverty that focus on particular social groups and categories associated with poverty, such as single-parent families, unemployed and low-income households. Finally, I review household studies and biographical accounts focusing on the meaning and perception that people give to their lives and the way that decisions, coping strategies and responses are formulated within households. I shall consider each of these approaches in turn, referring to relevant pieces of research and their implications for the concerns of this study.

1. Panel studies

A major attempt to trace the movement of individuals into and out of poverty over a period of time was the Michigan panel study, conducted in the United States over an eight year period between 1968 and 1976. This followed the patterns of income mobility experienced by individuals over this period, even as they left their original households and set up new ones. Duncan's analysis of the panel data indicated a high level of volatility with only a small percentage of those in poverty remaining persistently poor over a period of a few years (Duncan, 1984). This appeared to contradict much of what had been inferred from cross-sectional survey information about the permanence of situations of poverty. It is possible that the nature and persistence of poverty began to change after the period for which the panel data was available. But on the whole, it appeared that only a minority experienced poverty as a long-term condition and that much of this was related to persistent patterns of disadvantage affecting certain groups.

Bane and Ellwood, in another study of the dynamics of poverty, appeared to contradict some of these findings (Bane and Ellwood, 1986). They used a different methodology based on examining the duration of 'spells' of poverty and in this way confirmed that only a small fraction of those who entered poverty in any year remained chronically poor. But they also found that a majority of the poor at any one time were in the midst of rather long spells of poverty and that as the duration increased so did the probability of remaining in poverty. This suggested that the experience of long-term and persistent forms of poverty was more common than suggested by Duncan.

Duncan also analysed the determinants of mobility into and out of poverty. He found that labour market position and in particular, the commencement or loss of employment was the most significant cause of changes in economic well-being. By contrast, there existed only a very weak correlation between attitudes or behaviour and movement out of poverty. He also showed that changes in family circumstances were significant in moving individuals into and out of poverty. In particular, he found that marriage breakdown, resulting in the formation of female-headed families, was one of the major causes of changes in economic well-being for women. One effect of his study was to draw attention to the fluidity and change that occurred in people's situations as they constantly move into and out of the categories associated with poverty. Individuals might find themselves in poverty as a result of their circumstances as lone-parents or young single people. But while particular stages of the life-cycle might give rise to periods of poverty, individuals did not necessarily remain in poverty. This illustrates the importance of differentiating between the categories associated with poverty and the experiences of the individuals who fall within those categories at any particular moment.

Although no major income panel studies have been carried out in Britain, there have been a small number of longitudinal studies concerned with unemployment and income levels in and out of work (e.g. Moylan, Millar and Davies, 1984; Hancock, 1985). One of these was a study of the unemployed flow carried out by Daniel during the 1980s. His findings paralleled those of the American studies (Daniel, 1990). One of his conclusions was that although the long-term unemployed comprised a high proportion of the unemployed stock at any particular moment, only a much smaller number of people entering unemployment remained unemployed on a long-term basis. The study also demonstrated that the experience of unemployment

frequently introduced disruption, insecurity and downward job mobility into people's working lives and made them much more prone to subsequent job loss and unemployment. By contrast, conventional studies of unemployment still tend to suggest that finding a job is the end of the process and concentrate on the duration of spells of unemployment as the most important variable. Daniel argues instead that:

> ...focusing attention upon the length of one continuous period of unemployment is not a satisfactory way of looking at the costs and consequences of being out of work. One period of unemployment is often only an episode in a serial characterised by recurrent unemployment. The length of particular continuous durations seriously understates the amount of time people spend out of work in the longer term. The jobs that people take following unemployment are often unsatisfactory and break down quickly. (Daniel, 1990)

Although the study considers the experience of unemployment rather than poverty, it draws our attention to a number of points relating to conventional ideas and assumptions about the persistence of poverty over time. It establishes an association between long-term unemployment and low paid jobs with the strong likelihood that many people continue to experience poverty as an enduring condition throughout periods of both employment and unemployment. Thus in considering the nature and determinants of poverty it is important not to focus exclusively on spells of unemployment, but to consider the patterns of irregular employment and recurrent unemployment experienced by many people (e.g. N. Tyneside CDP, 1978; White, 1991). Poverty may be experienced as a long-term condition not only by those whose incomes remain consistently below a poverty line, but also by those whose patterns of employment and unemployment over time appear to indicate movement into and out of poverty. The change in income that they experience when they are employed, may be quite marginal and short-lived so that the social condition of these households remains one of poverty.

Panel studies, which chart people's movement into and out of poverty over time, provide an alternative perspective to studies that analyse poverty at a single point in time. Their value lies in their ability to indicate the degree of mobility into and out of income poverty and to counter the impression that poor people exist as a permanent group in society. They also alert us to the dangers of identifying individuals simply in terms of the social categories to which they are assigned on the basis of their circumstances as a particular moment in time. However, it is unclear what exactly can be inferred from these studies as long as they are limited to a single variable such as income or employment status. They provide little indication of how changes

in income affect other areas of people's lives such as their material well-being and living standards, and their self-perceptions, confidence and social relationships. In particular, it is not known how subjects themselves interpret changes in their conditions which appear to move them into or out of poverty, defined in income terms.

2. Ethnographic studies

An important part of understanding the nature and determinants of contemporary poverty is looking at how people themselves describe and experience poverty in their everyday lives in the context of the community in which they live. In this and the following two sections I consider examples of more qualitative research into poverty. This research varies in its focus, its concerns, its methods and its objectives. Here, I discuss three particular approaches: ethnographic studies that focus on a particular geographically-defined community and employ a variety of methods including interviews and participant observation; case-studies of specific groups of the population in poverty, based on structured interviews and surveys; and actor-oriented approaches which collect detailed biographical accounts through in-depth interviews with subjects in order to reveal their perspectives and strategies. There may be some overlap between these, for example, where studies of specific groups take place in a particular locality.

Damer's ethnographic study of Moorepark, a small housing estate in Glasgow commonly referred to as 'Wine Alley', is a good example of the first type (Damer, 1989). He attempted to demonstrate the process by which certain estates became socially constructed as 'problem estates' and local people stigmatised as a deviant and undeserving population. Using data from interviews, biographical accounts, documentary analysis and informal contacts gained through living in the area, he constructed an account of the labelling process by which the reality of poverty and poor housing conditions in the area became translated into powerful, negative myths concerning the inadequacy of local residents. In his conclusion, Damer argues that powerful ideological forces tend to shape our understanding and treatment of poor people along lines that reflect and uphold historical distinctions between the 'respectable' and the 'disreputable' poor.

Another locality-based piece of research is Wight's ethnographic study of unemployment in an ex-mining village in Scotland (Wight, 1987). Wight set out to understand and explain the attitudes and responses of those who became unemployed following the closure of the local mine. The study focuses on the social meanings of poverty and unemployment for local residents and how these relate to their aspirations for consumption, perceptions of social status, the meaning of work and unemployment in the community and the wider ethos of consumption in society. Like Damer's study, there is strong emphasis on locating the experience of individuals within their immediate social and spatial context. But he insists that an understanding of the internal dynamics of the community, its values, culture and consciousness and the opportunities and constraints it affords, must also take into account its relationship with the wider society.

A final example of this ethnographic approach is Liebow's study of 'negro street-corner men' which was conducted in a particular neighbourhood and relied upon participant observation and informal contacts with people in the area. (Liebow, 1967). The study effectively demonstrated how poor black people adapted to the lack of possibilities, options and jobs through various coping strategies and devices and by the adoption of 'street-corner values' and public fictions which made failure more acceptable and manageable. Liebow pointed out that the latter did not amount to a rejection of social norms and values or confirm the existence of a 'culture of poverty' among poor black men. Instead, what he observed in the attitudes and behaviour of subjects was a means of adapting to a structure of poverty that prevented the realisation of socially-approved goals:

> ...the street-corner man does not appear as the carrier of an independent cultural tradition. His behaviour appears not so much as a way of realising the distinctive goals and values of his own sub-culture or of conforming to its models, but rather, his way of trying to achieve many of the goals and values of the larger society, of failing to do this and of concealing his failure from others or from himself as best he can. (Liebow, 1967)

Ethnographic studies produce a great deal of information about how people make sense of their lives in relation to both local and wider social and cultural values and act on the basis of this understanding. They are often based on long periods of time spent conducting participant observation in a particular locality. They also make use of other research techniques including questionnaires, surveys and semi-structured interviews. One of their strengths is that they can help us to understand the

behaviour and actions of individuals and to identify the different ways in which people respond to external social realities at the micro-level (Hakim, 1987). Ethnographic studies also throw light on the relationship between social position, identity and local social structure and on the adaptive strategies and responses of local individuals. In this respect, they can reveal the importance of social stigma, cultural values and local social relations in the subjective experience and daily lives of local residents.

While the value of ethnographic studies is beyond doubt, few studies have been conducted which specifically concern the issue of poverty. A number of studies have taken place in areas characterised by high levels of unemployment and deprivation. However, they tend to deal more with the nature of the social relationships and networks, values and beliefs and resources and responses of people generally within these areas, than with the meaning and experience of poverty. This raises an important question in relation to studies intended to understand the experience of poverty. In what sense is it necessary and meaningful to differentiate particular households as 'poor' in order to study poverty, especially if the term represents an externally imposed form of categorisation, rather than one that is used and recognised by people themselves? This question has significant implications for the design of this research and I return to it in the following chapter.

3. Qualitative studies of particular groups associated with poverty

More specifically concerned with poverty than these ethnographic studies of small neighbourhoods, are studies that seek to document the experience of poverty among particular groups such as single-parent families or young people (e.g. Millar, 89; Wallace, 1987). Some of these studies have examined the impact of changes in or withdrawals of benefits on the living standards of lone-parent families, young single people or disabled people (e.g. Craig and Glendinning, 1990; Becker and Silburn, 1990). They also include a number of small-scale studies looking at the personal, social and material consequences of unemployment in the lives of individuals (e.g. Marsden and Duff, 1975; Sinfield, 1981; Marsden, 1982; Harris, Lee and Morris, 1985). One particular example is Ritchie's study of 30 unemployed households commissioned by the DHSS, which concentrated on defining and assessing living standards in and out of work. It also incorporated a longitudinal element with follow-up interviews conducted two years after the initial study (Ritchie, 1990).

Qualitative research of this type is usually less concerned with understanding the cultural meanings, values and attitudes of people experiencing material hardship and more with documenting their living conditions, resources and forms of deprivation. Typically these studies are based on questionnaires and structured interviews with a random sample of anywhere between 25 and 100 individuals or households. The sample frame is usually constructed using certain criteria to standardise for age, sex, employment status, household type, income level and so on. The intention is to achieve a degree of standardisation and representativeness which will allow some scope for extrapolation and generalisation to a wider population.

A good example of this type of research is a study carried out for the Child Poverty Action Group which looked at unemployed families in Tyne and Wear (Bradshaw and Holmes, 1989). A combination of questionnaires, interviews and daily diaries was used to record the living standards and life-styles of families on supplementary benefit. The book is organised into chapters which look at respondents' housing, employment situation, income and savings, expenditure and assets and their general well-being (defined in terms of their health and the forms of deprivation and social exclusion they experience) The study points to the gap between the inadequate life-styles and forms of deprivation and hardship experienced by the subjects of the study and the kinds of living standards, activities and expectations considered normal or customary in society.

The study implies that subjects' overall level of well-being is determined by the material conditions and forms of deprivation that they experience. The respondents were asked, for example, to select the particular problems that they faced from a long list of potential difficulties. Consequently, the lives of those individuals in the study are described essentially in terms of their experience of various problems, constraints and difficulties. The subjects are cast in an essentially passive role as regards the maintenance of their well-being. The overall effect is to define a particular subjectivity associated with the experience of relative deprivation that depicts people's lives solely in terms of their endurance of these conditions. In this context, the surprising observation that a third of the sample expressed satisfaction with their lives is quite contrary to our expectations. And yet this finding is not explained.

A more recent example of this kind of research is provided by another CPAG publication entitled 'Hardship Britain' (Cohen et al, 1992). The authors explicitly locate the book in a tradition of poverty research which seeks to influence both public opinion and government policy by exposing the 'reality of poverty for people'. The study is intended to meet the need for more research 'from below' by giving the perspective of those who experience poverty. To this end, 6 case-studies are presented which attempt to show what it is like to be in poverty, what people experience and put up with and how their lives are affected by poverty. These case-studies are concerned not only with the material dimensions of poverty but also its personal, social and psychological consequences - shame, stress, poor health, loss of incentive, social exclusion, depression, pessimism and a generally poor quality of life.

One interesting finding of the study was that most of the subjects were reluctant to describe themselves as poor. This appears to contradict the overwhelming evidence of material deprivation in the study. However, little time is spent on exploring the reasons for this. My point here is not to suggest that the subjects of the study were in fact quite happy and content with their circumstances, despite the evidence of material hardship. Nor am I suggesting that people's subjective assessment of their situation as poor or not is somehow more valid than the objective criteria used in defining people's conditions as poor. However, this style of research appears implicitly based on a model of poverty which assumes that individual's experience of poverty can be reduced to the hardships and deprivations they endure.

The value of these studies is that they reveal in detail the human costs and effects of poverty in people's lives in a way that abstract concepts and figures cannot convey. Attention is focused on the living conditions, lack of resources and forms of material hardship endured by people in poverty. They also record the impact of changes in social policy that restrict or reduce the provision of welfare benefits to certain groups. What these studies rarely do is tell us about the routes by which these households come into poverty, the nature of the changes and processes that they experience over time or the duration of poverty in their lives. The methodology employed is designed to provide a snapshot picture of people's living conditions at a particular moment in time. Also missing from these accounts is a genuine attempt to convey a sense of the subjects as actors and social agents who seek to affect their lives and improve their conditions through their own actions.

4. Studies based on intensive interviews and biographical accounts

There are several examples of studies which examine the decision-making processes and strategies within households and the values and beliefs which guide people's actions and behaviour. In-depth studies of particular individuals and households can show how people's circumstances have changed over time while revealing the meaning of different events and circumstances for people themselves. They allow us to trace the impact of major processes of social change on the actual experience, values, aspirations, etc. of specific social groups within the social and economic contexts in which people live (Elliott, 1988). They also alert us to the fact that housing, employment or consumption decisions are shaped by the social meanings attached to these and their interpretation by specific individuals.

Pahl's study of household labour is an example of this approach, although not concerned specifically with poverty (Pahl, 1984). The research was carried out on the Isle of Sheppey and employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Detailed biographical accounts were obtained using in-depth interviews with household members in order to reveal the perceptions, experiences and strategies that lay behind their engagement in various forms of paid and unpaid work. These accounts were then linked to data collected through social surveys which showed a growing polarisation and division of households in terms of employment, living standards and opportunities. The research looked closely at how patterns of household decision-making related to wider structural processes.

In recent years a number of studies have focused on the strategies and decision-making processes found among poor households. In the field of housing, research has attempted to trace the links between people's housing histories, choices and constraints and their employment patterns and labour market experience (e.g. Forrest and Murie, 1991). Franklin in a study of household decision-making in relation to housing moves based his study on detailed, biographical accounts obtained from just three households, chosen as illustrating particular case types (Franklin, 1990). Wallman, in a study of 8 low-income households in Battersea, found that despite the tendency to homogenise the problems and experiences of poor households through the use of labels like 'inner-city problems', there existed significant differences in the conditions, expectations, use of resources and kinds of strategies adopted within particular households (Wallman, 1984).

Of particular relevance to this study is a piece of work concerned with the issue of welfare dependence among poor people living on a deprived council estate (Jordan et al, 1992). Through paying careful attention to the rationales and explanations provided by household members, the authors examined how low-income families moved into and out of the labour market, made decisions about employment and claiming benefits and devised strategies within the household. Their emphasis on the way in which people make sense of their situation and act on the basis of this understanding conflicts with accounts of poverty in which subjects appear only as passive victims of social and economic change, trapped by their circumstances in a condition of benefit dependence. At the same time, it is demonstrated that people do not simply act as rational egoists who exploit the benefit system in order to maximise their income. Their decisions are influenced by social roles and moral values (in relation to work, self-reliance and the family) and not purely by economic considerations.

The value of this kind of research which focuses on individual accounts is that it can reveal to us not only the facts of people's lives in terms of their movements in and out of poverty, but the meaning that events and decisions had for them, the values and attitudes that framed their actions and the aspirations and strategies that influenced them (Sayer, 1984). This approach may go some way towards addressing the issue of what poverty means and entails for individuals and groups identified as poor. However, I am aware of no studies that have looked specifically at the meaning of poverty in the lives of individuals and families who experience material deprivation nor how their behaviour and actions are shaped by the social meanings attached to being poor in contemporary society.

Conceptualising the experience of poverty: a framework

This review of research on poverty suggests that in order to understand the experience of poverty we need to consider more than the lack of material resources and its effects on the living standards of subjects. It is important to relate these conditions to both the precipitating causes and enduring circumstances of specific individuals, the kinds of strategies developed in response to poverty and its impact on the personal identity of those it affects. There is a need for research which explores both the social meanings of poverty and its personal experience at the level of the individual. Such research should examine the significance of the social world

that people occupy, including the social meanings, values and beliefs that shape their perception of and response to situations of unemployment, irregular or low-paid employment and material deprivation that they experience. It should also look at how cultural values and moral attitudes towards work, the family, self-reliance and so on have a bearing on people's understanding of what it means to be poor.

In this final section, my aim is to develop a framework for carrying out research into the experience of poverty. The studies I have reviewed in the preceding section indicate four aspects of the experience of poverty which need to be considered: first, the nature of people's material and social circumstances, how these change over time and their effect on the lives and well-being of individuals; second, the subjective perceptions, values and expectations of individuals in defining and making sense of their situation; third, the particular strategies and responses developed by individuals and households in responding to the circumstances they face and the underlying meanings, resources and relationships these reveal; and fourth, the local social setting in which people live their lives. I consider these in turn.

1. Material and social circumstances

In many small-scale studies of poverty, it is the detailed documentation of the social and material conditions within poor households that is the primary objective of research. Thus the particular financial, employment and household circumstances of individuals are all seen as relevant to the condition of poverty. However, because many of these studies offer only a snapshot account of conditions at a particular moment in time, these circumstances are frequently regarded as an enduring part of poor people's lives. This may reinforce a tendency to view poverty as a long-term, unchanging, problem state experienced by those unlucky enough to fall into certain categories co-terminous with poverty, such as single-parent families, unskilled labourers and unemployed households.

What is frequently ignored in these accounts is some conception of the changes in circumstance that occur over the life-time, associated with critical stages in the life-cycle or with certain adverse or fortuitous occurrences. As we have seen, longitudinal studies suggest that poverty should be seen as a dynamic process and a changing condition, rather than a static and permanent state of affairs. Various studies have shown how changes in household circumstances, income and

employment status may be responsible for mobility into and out of the categories associated with poverty (e.g. O'Higgins, Bradshaw and Walker, 1988). In understanding the experience of poverty, it is important to be aware of the fluidity and fluctuations in people's situation generally over time.

The current social and material circumstances of specific individuals and households may therefore be regarded as a product both of the enduring conditions and difficulties they face and the occurrence of particular precipitating events (Titterton, 1992). From this point of view, single-parenthood and unemployment, for example, are regarded not as permanent conditions, but as phases related to particular life-events in the course of the histories of these individuals. These significant life-events include job-loss and job-gain, retirement, marriage, the birth of children, divorce and separation, moving house, sickness and household formation, all of which might be responsible for changes in income, needs, benefit entitlements and expenditure.

Thus in practice, it is necessary to consider the duration of particular social and material circumstances in people's lives, the causal processes responsible for changes in circumstance and their consequences in terms of other areas of people's lives. This means attempting to understand the links between income and material resources on the one hand and the personal and social dimensions of poverty on the other. Empirical research is needed which examines the impact of changes in financial and material circumstance on subjective and non-material aspects of well-being and the mediating factors involved, especially where these are responsible for moving households into or out of poverty.

2. Subjective perceptions and meanings of poverty

In many of the studies reviewed, subjects were identified as poor because their circumstances - as unemployed households, single-parent families, low paid workers, pensioners, etc. - placed them in the category of poverty. There was often an underlying assumption that people's subjective understanding of their situation corresponded to the objective definition of their circumstances as poor. In practice, it is by no means clear that subjects employ the same definitions and standards in representing their situation. In some of the studies reviewed it appeared that respondents did not see themselves as poor even where their circumstances indicated otherwise. It is essential therefore to look at the meanings and understandings that

people themselves employ in describing their own circumstances (or those of other people) as poor and the degree of correspondence that exists between these subjective definitions of poverty and more objective measures.

Townsend, in his comprehensive study of poverty mentioned earlier, devotes a chapter to the issue of how people's subjective assessment of their situation relates to their poverty status as defined according to the notion of relative deprivation (Townsend, 1979). In general, he found a 'marked relationship' between objective conditions and subjective expressions of deprivation. However, there were also inconsistencies. For example, half of those questioned with an income below the poverty line stated that they never felt poor. He accounts for this in terms of inaccuracies in the methodology and in particular, the reliance on income as a measure of resources and the inadequacy of the subjective indicators employed. But he accepts that in certain circumstances, people might not feel subjectively poor, although objectively they were poor. This is especially true, he points out, where conditions of low income are experienced continuously for some period of time or where informal contacts and relationships appeared largely unaffected by poverty.

Runciman suggests another explanation for why people may not recognise themselves as poor, even when this was contradicted by their objective circumstances (Runciman, 1966). People's sense of relative deprivation, he argues, is determined by the particular membership groups with which they identify and their choice of comparative reference groups. In looking at how people make sense of and explain their circumstances, an important factor is how they identify themselves in relation to other people and on this basis assess their living conditions and life-style and construct their expectations and goals. Runciman suggests that many people select these groups in order to minimise their sense of being poor or deprived and to enable them to make more positive comparisons between their own circumstances and those considered worse off.

People may dispute the fact that they are poor because their own understanding of their situation conflicts with the ideas that they hold about who in society is poor and what it means to be poor. These may derive from cultural notions of poverty which construct poor people in negative and stigmatising ways, e.g. as an underclass, as 'problem' families or as an incapable and dependent minority (Dean, 1991). The meaning of people's circumstances may be interpreted both by subjects themselves and by other people not just in terms of the level of material hardship and financial

struggle they experience, but in terms of their inability to fulfil wider social roles and norms. In this sense, they may feel that being poor involves an element of stigma and shame in terms of how they are perceived and treated by other people and its effects on their own self-image and identity. It is therefore crucial to consider the personal and social meanings of poverty that lay behind people's subjective perceptions and representations of their situations.

3. Personal strategies, actions and resources

Structural factors are an important determinant of people's position in the labour market, the socio-economic class to which they belong, the government system of welfare upon which they may depend, the structure of the housing market and the general level of inequality and social division in society. They provide the constraints within which people live their lives and are closely associated with the determinants and duration of the spells of poverty experienced by particular individuals and households. But the experience of poverty cannot be explained simply by reference to the structural determinants of people's conditions. There is a further dimension we need to consider in understanding the experience of poverty and the processes by which people remain in or move out of poverty. This concerns the individual responses, actions and strategies pursued by households in dealing with or avoiding conditions of poverty.

This requires a perspective that treats individuals and communities as actively attempting to adjust to, alleviate, escape from and overcome situations of poverty. It means considering how people cope, get by, make decisions and plans and modify and change their situation over time, rather than focusing exclusively on the different kinds of constraints that they face. Their scope for action will depend on the different kinds of resources available to them through family and friends. The latter may, for example, provide child-caring services in order that some form of employment or training can be undertaken. It also depends on the various services and resources provided by voluntary and statutory sector organisations, their conditions of eligibility, the opportunities they provide and their reputation and image among ordinary people.

The formulation of particular coping strategies and plans also reflects people's expectations and understandings of the options open to them given, their present

circumstances. These strategies embody complex normative as well as material aspirations. In a detailed account of the strategies adopted by poor citizens during different historical periods, Vincent shows that they are influenced to a large extent by the strategies of the state and its agencies in addressing the needs and welfare of the poor (Vincent, 1991). Jordan et al show that decision-making processes among poor households are made in the context of wider cultural and social values in relation to work, the family, self-reliance and achievement, in terms of which a person's status and worth are assessed (Jordan et al, 1992).

4. Local social context and relationships

Finally, to complete our picture of how individuals experience their lives in and out of poverty we need to consider a range of factors such as the availability and use of various local resources, informal channels of information and help, local social networks, cultural values and status signifiers. People identify themselves and are identified by others in relation to their immediate social and cultural context and the nature of their social relationships. In research carried out in Hartlepool which looked at households in four different communities, it was found that people's responses to unemployment were shaped by local social relations, informal networks and the opportunities for contact with the world of work (Morris, 1987 and 1988). The research demonstrated the importance of local social structure in creating and reinforcing patterns of social polarisation and the way in which this resulted in distinct social and spatial groupings of households.

Individual accounts of the experience and impact of poverty must be set within a specific social and spatial context. How people manage their day to day lives and respond to and interpret their circumstances is determined in important ways by the context of the community in which they find themselves and how it contributes to and reinforces the experience of poverty in respect of local housing conditions, services and facilities and the patterns of stigma and social segregation that develop. Of particular interest is the way in which the local community is perceived by residents and by other people outside the area and the kinds of resources, social networks and informal contacts that are available locally. It is through their social relationships that people may seek to protect themselves from precariousness, uncertainty and powerlessness in their lives (Marris, 1982).

Conclusion

My argument in this chapter is that the study of poverty has become limited by its concentration on establishing objective measures which enable us to describe the numbers and groups of people in poverty. This has led to an emphasis on defining and theorising the category of poverty rather than understanding how poverty is experienced and what it means for individuals themselves. The concentration on categories of poverty in academic research has contributed to a rather static and ahistorical notion of poverty. This reinforces the impression of poverty as a fixed identity and status for some people. It also gives rise to a tendency to construct people's experience of poverty simply in terms of the defining features of the category of poverty, for example, as material hardship, social exclusion or relative deprivation. There may be little regard for the subjective perceptions, the life-course changes and the responses and actions that are important components of the experience of individuals over time.

In reviewing various discourses and theories of poverty concerning the existence of an underclass, a dependency culture or a new poverty, I suggested that a common feature of these accounts was the relegation of poor people to the status of passive, non-agents, unable or unwilling to affect the circumstances of their lives. The experience of poverty is conceptualised either as a matter of individual failure and social pathological behaviour or as a product of structural factors and wider social and economic processes. A cultural perspective sees poor individuals as sharing a distinctive set of attitudes and subjective orientations which reinforce the attitudes and behaviours that keep them in poverty. A structuralist perspective also appears to fix individuals in poverty, but this time because they are credited with little scope for personal agency or power to change their circumstances. In both cases, the poor are conceptualised largely as non-agents, who lack the ability to change their lives through their own actions. They become seen as helpless victims, cut adrift from society, permanently excluded and trapped in poverty.

This raises some important questions about the relationship between objective conditions of poverty and the social meanings, identities and status attached to being poor. Individuals and households are categorised as 'poor' when their social and material conditions fall below various standards employed by researchers to measure poverty. However, the construction of an analytical category of poor people may give the impression that poor people exist as a distinct social type or group of the

population, defined in terms of their difference from the non-poor. Once identified as poor, individuals and groups may have foisted upon them a particular identity and subjectivity as poor people. They are then assumed to internalise and act out characteristics associated with the poverty status assigned them. In most studies of poverty, the process of categorising people as 'poor' is considered unproblematic and merits little discussion.

In this chapter I have suggested that a much neglected area of research is how people themselves describe their experiences and circumstances and the things they perceive as essential to their own welfare. Instead, 'the poor' are usually cast as the objects of research and of social interventions designed to improve their circumstances. They are rarely portrayed as social actors who strategically organise themselves, make decisions and act upon the constraints they face in their everyday lives. In many studies, there is little to indicate any dissonance between the researcher's categorisation of individuals or groups as poor and people's own self-image and perception of themselves. The conflation of an objective condition of poverty with a particular social identity and subjective reality as 'poor people' disregards the possibility that people interpret their experiences and perceive their lives in ways which conflict with the identification of them as poor.

In this study, my aim is to re-introduce the subject into the discussion of poverty. A framework is proposed for looking at the experience of poverty which incorporates the following dimensions. First, it is important to recognise the significance of change and process in the social and material circumstances of individuals and the importance of various life-course changes and events. This means following people's circumstances over time and examining how changes in their income and material conditions translate into social and personal meanings. Second, attention should be directed at people's own representations and understandings of their circumstances, their points of reference and comparison and their sense of the difficulties and constraints that they face. Third, various mediating factors need to be taken into account which affect the ability of individuals to manage their situation and maintain a sense of well-being. These might include their access to resources and opportunities of various kinds as well as their personal and coping skills. Finally, the local social context and the nature of their social relationships are important factors affecting people's access to resources, their strategies, their sense of identity and their well-being.

Chapter 3. The design of the study: method, analysis and interpretation

Introduction

In this chapter I set out how I planned to do the research, the process of fieldwork that followed and the methods of analysis that I used. First of all, I describe the initial research questions and how these were developed into a research plan. Second, I describe how I went about conducting the fieldwork, the decisions and choices made along the way and some of the problems and issues that arose. Third, I consider issues of qualitative data analysis and how I went about interpreting people's accounts of their lives.

The presentation of the chapter in this form is not meant to imply that the research progressed through a series of discrete stages, starting with the initial design stage, then moving on to the fieldwork and later, the analysis. In fact, the research plan was significantly revised and modified during the course of the fieldwork and the process of interpreting and making sense of the data continued throughout the period during which interviews were conducted. In this chapter, I shall try to do justice to the process of research by discussing the various problems that arose during the fieldwork and the decisions and modifications that had to be made. Thus, I shall attempt to tell the story of the research and how my own ideas and thinking evolved over time, rather than simply presenting the outcomes as they appeared to me at the end of this process.

In the first part of this chapter, my task is to show how the ideas and issues explored in the last chapter were developed into a specific research topic. In the second section, I describe how the fieldwork was actually conducted and the various problems and difficulties that arose. An important issue in designing the research was the question of whether people in poverty constructed their lives and identities using the same kinds of discourses and categories as those employed by social commentators and poverty researchers. My intention was therefore to focus on the subjective accounts and definitions of respondents. A small-scale qualitative study that would document people's experiences and perceptions of their lives within a poor neighbourhood was seen as the best means to do this. The scope of the study

was intended to cover the causes and duration of spells of poverty in people's lives, the kinds of feelings, identities and subjectivities associated with poverty and the relationship between discourse and social practice among individuals and groups in poverty.

In describing the methodological and analytical issues encountered in the research, I inevitably touch on some of the important themes and arguments of the study as a whole, which are developed in later chapters. It is evident that when respondents interpret their own conditions and experiences of poverty, they do so in ways which allow them to give meaning to their lives as social actors and agents and not simply as the passive victims of structural processes beyond their control. Their accounts are constructed by reference to moral ideas about poverty and poor people which appear to threaten their self-image and identity. Thus, I focus on the moral framework of their accounts and the rhetorical devices by which they establish themselves as active and respectable members of society, as responsible parents and morally adequate individuals. My task in this chapter is to demonstrate to the reader how I reached this position, by describing in detail how the research was carried out and the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Research aims and design

The theoretical and conceptual issues discussed in the last chapter form the background to this chapter's discussion of the aims and design of the research and the practical and methodological problems encountered in carrying out the fieldwork. In this section, I outline the approach adopted in the study which attempted to build on the framework conceived in the previous chapter. Following this, I set out the main aims and objectives of the research and finally, I discuss the methodological issues and considerations affecting the design of the research.

My review of the literature on poverty in the previous chapter concluded that the heavy emphasis placed on defining and describing poverty as an objective condition had limited discussion of its subjective and cultural aspects. As a result, research on poverty had generally failed to present people as subjects and actors. There was often little indication of what people experienced in poverty, the nature and duration of their spells of poverty and the meaning and significance of poverty within their lives as a whole. It is not suggested that a complete account or explanation of

poverty can be produced through a focus on the subjective definitions and meanings of poverty articulated by subjects alone. Instead, it is important to give due recognition both to the part played by human action and consciousness and to how individual actions and beliefs are shaped by larger frames of meaning. This means identifying the various patterns and forms of understanding, meaning and interpretation that underpin individual's accounts of their experiences and exploring how these relate to various definitions and conceptions of people's lives as poor.

On this basis I argued that there was a need for research which looked at the subjective dimensions of poverty and the meaning of poverty for those whose circumstances defined them as 'poor'. This study was intended to fill this gap by adopting the following guidelines as a basis for exploring the experience of poverty. First, it was recognised that poverty encompassed a number of aspects and dimensions of people's lives, including their identity and status, sense of agency, social relationships and opportunities and not just the financial and material constraints associated with a lack of income. Second, in order to understand people's experience of poverty it was necessary to take a long-term view which examined how their conditions and circumstances changed over time. Third, subjects should be presented as social actors and agents who interpret and make sense of their conditions and act on the basis of this understanding. Finally, people's experience of poverty must be considered within the context of the local social relations and community structures in which they live their lives.

It was also observed that the notion of poverty did not exist in a vacuum but took on particular meanings in relation to wider cultural values, norms and expectations in society. Thus the nature of the discourses and cultural images employed in discussions of poverty helped shape people's ideas about the meaning of poverty and the kinds of identity, life-style and behaviour they associated with poor people. This influenced both the forms of social action to tackle poverty and the experience of those identified as poor. The interest of this study therefore lay in the interaction between subjective, cultural and objective definitions of poverty. Of particular concern was the way in which individuals and groups identified by other people as poor constructed their own self-definitions and interpret the meaning of poverty in relation to their own lives.

This favoured an approach which treated individuals as subjects, characterised by the ability to define and make sense of their circumstances and to act and devise

strategies. The strategy proposed was to trace people's conditions and circumstances over time in order to explore the relationship between the availability of material resources and subjective assessments of well-being. This would provide a basis for identifying people's experience of poverty. I then planned to explore the processes, strategies and meanings through which people attempted to manage and make sense of periods of poverty in their lives.

I was not therefore proposing to dispense with the notion of poverty as an objective condition by establishing an alternative conception of poverty based on the subjective perceptions and definitions of individuals. Nor was I suggesting that there existed some definitive set of experiences, behaviours or conditions that bound together the lives of poor people. In directing attention to the experience of poverty within the lives of specific individuals, my intention was to highlight a dimension of poverty which I believed had been neglected by conventional approaches. There was never any suggestion that poverty could be explained and understood simply in terms of the personal experience and actions of individuals, without reference to the wider social and economic sphere in which social inequalities and divisions and the distribution of opportunities and resources are established.

The design of the research - aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of this study were guided by the question of how to understand poverty as a dynamic process and a personal experience in the lives of individuals. The scope of the study was intended to embrace both material and social aspects and subjective and objective dimensions of the experience of poverty. Thus, at the start of the project my objectives were as follows:

1. To explore the dynamics of poverty in people's lives, how their circumstances changed over time, the particular factors or events responsible for the conditions of poverty they experienced and the decisions, actions and coping strategies through which they attempted to shape their environment and modify the circumstances of their lives.

The aim here was to identify the particular changes and events that were significant in people's experience of poverty. It was planned to look at the effects of various constraining factors such as the availability of different kinds of resources, the labour

market position of individuals, their household circumstances, place of residence, social relationships and informal contacts, job skills and opportunities and so on. It was also intended to consider the influence of people's own values, goals and resources and their adoption of particular coping strategies and responses in mediating their welfare. Through this process, the goal was to arrive at a better understanding and conceptualisation of poverty in terms of its dynamics and its duration over time.

2. To understand the non-material and subjective dimensions of poverty including its effects on people's identity and self-image, their social relationships and activities and their expectations and hopes.

A second objective was to explore how respondents assessed their personal and family well-being in relation to their income and material circumstances. This would involve relating changes in income-poverty (defined in relation to the state benefit level) to subjective expressions of well-being in terms of the needs, standards, forms of insecurity and feelings of social exclusion identified by people themselves. The significance of local social relations and forms of community organisation and action would also be considered as aspects of people's experience of poverty.

3. To learn about the framework of beliefs and ideas that people held about poverty and how this related to wider social meanings and discourses on poverty.

Of particular interest was the question of how the subjective feelings, perceptions and coping strategies of people in poverty related to the cultural and ideological meanings attached to their material circumstances. Underlying this was the desire to locate the experiences and perceptions of individuals in relation to broader social processes and to consider the wider issue of how poverty is socially constructed in society. Emphasis would be given to people's own perceptions, experiences and understandings of their situation over time and how this related to objective definitions and cultural representations of poverty.

These concerns clearly placed the research within an interpretative framework. This favoured a small-scale study which would focus on specific households and explore

their understanding of poverty as it related to their own personal experience. In-depth interviews would enable a significant amount of qualitative data to be collected based on people's own accounts of their lives. The interviews would be conducted in a relatively informal and relaxed manner and would be loosely structured around certain themes and issues. This method was chosen in preference to other ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation, because it gave scope for examining the changes that took place in people's circumstances over the course of time. Respondents would be encouraged to relate not only the details of their experiences and circumstances, but also their meaning and significance for them. Three particular sets of questions were identified:

- How dynamic and changeable are people's situations of poverty over time? Do respondents experience poverty as a long-term condition or as a temporary period of economic insufficiency? What change in conditions would constitute a movement out of poverty for these individuals?

- In what sense do respondents describe themselves or other people as poor? In relation to what sets of conditions, norms and reference groups are these assessments made? What events or factors are responsible, in their opinion, for times of hardship or difficulty, compared to periods in which they feel better-off?

- How do respondents' subjective experiences and perceptions of their circumstances relate to 'objective' measures of poverty based on their household income, employment status and living standards? For example, what factors are responsible for feelings of well-being or a sense of coping and in what circumstances do people feel excluded, trapped, helpless or dependent?

The focus of the study - people and place

The research was intended to be interpretative and to begin from the standpoint of the actor. But this still left a number of questions: which particular actors and how many, on what basis would they be selected and how would they be contacted?

The strategy proposed was to target neighbourhoods associated with a high level of poverty and to concentrate on the experiences of people from these areas for the study. My preference was to focus on a single locality in order to explore in detail

the significance of the local social and spatial context in people's experiences of poverty. As a first step, it was therefore important to clarify the nature of the relationship between poverty and poor people in these areas. In particular, it was necessary to consider the following questions. On what basis is a particular area identified as 'poor'? What can be inferred about the poverty status of residents who live in a 'poor' area? And by what criteria should individual residents be selected for a study focusing on the experience of poverty?

In relation to the first question, I decided to adopt the Local Authority's assessment of social needs and levels of deprivation within different areas of the city. The reason for this was that I wanted to select an area identified as poor on the basis of official criteria. The particular indicators of deprivation employed by the Local Authority took account of levels of unemployment; the proportion of the local population dependent on state benefits; health and mortality rates; quality of housing stock; void levels and housing turnover. On this basis three areas had been designated 'priority areas', all of them peripheral estates located on the edge of the city. Each was characterised by high levels of economic inactivity and single-parent households and unpopular, 'hard to let' Local Authority housing. A reputation for social problems, especially drug addiction and anti-social behaviour, added to the popular view of these areas as unpleasant and undesirable places to live.

It was of course questionable whether these indicators established the existence of poverty in these areas. Some of the measures employed clearly correlated with poverty, for example, those indicating a high proportion of low-income groups in the area. Others referred to social problems and conditions in the area, such as poor housing, which are often associated with poverty, but not strictly indicators of it. The Local Authority was primarily concerned with channelling resources to those areas identified as having greatest need. It was evident that poverty was regarded as an important aspect in the assessment of need as well as a major factor underlying and exacerbating social problems in the locality. Thus in official terms, the designation of certain areas as 'priority areas' signalled a higher incidence of poverty among residents compared to other places.

The particular area that I chose from the 3 designated priority areas had been selected for inclusion in the European Poverty 3 Programme, which had been designed to promote ways of tackling poverty at the local level. This further reinforced the status of the area as a 'poverty area'. It also offered certain advantages

to me, in terms of the availability of statistical data and background reports mapping needs and provision in the area. The establishment of a local partnership organisation to oversee the development of the area had succeeded in drawing together a range of different interest groups, community organisations and local projects. This facilitated my own task in gaining access to potential gate-keepers and making contact with key individuals and organisations important for my own study. Furthermore, I already had some informal contacts among people living or working in the area, including two research workers from the university who were employed as part of the poverty programme to carry out research and evaluation.

Much has been written about the dangers of inferring individual characteristics from group-level characteristics (e.g. Townsend, 1976). Certain questions about the relationship between the area's characteristics as a 'poor area' and the status of local residents as poor people have to be considered. The designation of an area as a poor or deprived locality indicates that it has a higher than average level of poverty and poverty-related problems in the area. However, it is important to avoid the 'ecological fallacy' of assuming that all people in the area are, in fact, poor or that poverty and social problems are confined to particular areas (see Holtermann, 1975). Although there is a greater chance of locating people who are in poverty in areas such as the one chosen, it cannot be assumed that the accounts and experiences provided by a random selection of local residents chosen for the study are those of poor people.

On what basis can those interviewed be regarded as poor or as qualified to talk about poverty as a matter of personal experience? One approach would be to employ some measure of poverty as a means of defining particular households as poor in order to ensure that the research focuses specifically on those who are currently experiencing poverty. But this gives rise to a practical and methodological problem: how can we identify and contact households in poverty without having advance knowledge of their income, household and employment situation. An alternative approach would be to adopt some other standard such as unemployment or reliance on state benefits as a proxy for poverty. However, I was reluctant to adopt this approach as it would mean confining the study to claimants and excluding those in various forms of temporary, low paid or part-time employment.

A different approach was therefore adopted in this study. Rather than seeking to establish that subjects were currently poor according to some objective measure of

poverty, it was decided that the most important thing was to interview people whose circumstances enabled them to talk about poverty as something which affected them personally. My primary concern was to record people's views on how poverty related to their own circumstances and affected their own personal lives. By contrast, I was less interested in their statements on poverty as a general social issue or their views about poverty as a condition of other people quite separate from their own lives. This distinction was crucial. For the residents of a poor housing estate, it was their proximity to poverty that was important. The fact that residence in such an area marked them out as poor in the eyes of others meant that they inevitably lived their lives in a context of poverty. Even if they were not currently poor, it was possible to speculate that a high proportion of residents had experienced or were likely to experience poverty in their lives.

The proposal was therefore to carry out approximately 25-30 interviews with local residents. Participants were to be identified and contacted with the help of local community organisations and through a process of 'snow-balling', i.e. asking contacts, respondents and other informants to put me in touch with people they thought would be willing to be interviewed. I considered whether any other criteria should be applied in assessing the suitability of subjects. Should I seek to exclude, for example, individuals whose living standards or employment situation clearly placed them well above the poverty line? This was potentially problematic. It would require prior information about the circumstances and resources of households and the employment of a standard of poverty which might well be disputed. It would also exclude from the study those who had experienced poverty in the past but whose material and financial situation had improved in recent years.

I considered limiting the study to particular household types, perhaps focusing on those households comprising one or two parent families with children still living at home. An alternative possibility which presented itself was to concentrate on households in which a recent change in employment circumstances had taken place and to engage the help of a local job advice centre to locate such households. These ideas were eventually abandoned when it became apparent that finding sufficient people willing to participate in the study was a problem. It also proved difficult in practice to get local organisations to apply specific criteria in making approaches to people on my behalf. The research brief I sent out to community organisations did make explicit my interest in talking to people who had experienced poverty. The

question of how these organisations interpreted and applied this criteria is an issue I discuss later in the chapter.

The design and format of the interviews

The research was intended to be exploratory in nature, rather than to answer a specific research question. The aim was to ensure a sufficient degree of flexibility in the research design to enable particular themes and issues to be taken up as they emerged in the course of the research. A loose structure was proposed in order to maximise the scope for individuals to define the issues and problems as they perceived them. In this way, the research would be grounded in individual's own accounts of their attitudes, motivations and behaviour (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Strauss and Glaser, 1967). The emphasis would be on learning about people's self-perceptions and attitudes, the meanings and interpretations they gave to their experiences and how these were put together in a particular framework which connected their beliefs and actions.

This invited a methodological approach which employed open-ended questions to encourage subjects to interpret and make sense of their lives according to their own frame of reference. The interviews were designed to encourage people, through a series of questions and prompts, to describe in detail the changing circumstances and significant events of their lives and how these related to their understanding of poverty. A first set of issues concerned people's view of their scope for action in relation to the external realities and structures they identified. How did they accommodate themselves, make sense of their situation and try to overcome the constraints they perceive? A second set of questions related to conceptual issues and explored the way in which people interpreted and understood the terms poverty, community and welfare in relation to their personal experience. How were 'common-sense' ideas and popular discourses on poverty incorporated into their accounts of their lives to form part of the meanings through which they constructed their identity, their expectations and their strategies and responses?

Rather than conducting the interviews as a series of structured questions, an interview guide was drawn up as a means of structuring conversation around certain broad areas that I wanted to explore. It also helped to ensure that the main issues were covered. The interview guide consisted of several broad questions with

appropriate cues and probes, the aim being to open up topics and allow respondents to construct meaningful answers. It was designed around a number of simple questions to encourage people to describe the significant events and changes in their lives and to explore certain aspects of their experience, perceptions and actions. The interview guides used in the study can be found in Appendix 2.

There were three main areas of interest:

1. The objective conditions and changes in employment, household, family and living circumstances experienced by respondents over time and the effects on their living standards and resources. This would be used to establish the determinants and duration of periods of poverty in people's lives.

2. People's subjective perceptions and definitions of their situation, their welfare, their scope for action. This was concerned with how subjects presented themselves in terms of their values, priorities and expectations, their identity and social position and their responses to the adverse occurrences and difficulties they experienced. How did they understand poverty and in what sense, if at all, did they see themselves as poor?

3. The importance of the immediate social context and local social relations. In particular, the significance and meaning of various informal networks, local community groups and organisations to respondents. This was concerned with how subjects identified themselves in relation to other people, both in the area and elsewhere. Who did they see as poor and what effects did living in a 'poor' area have on their identity, status and opportunities?

The interviews were conducted in people's own houses or, if they preferred, in unused rooms or offices within local community projects. They lasted between one and two hours and were taped using a small personal recorder. Despite initial reservations expressed by one or two people, all 16 individuals who agreed to participate in the interviews consented to them being recorded. In a few cases, it was observed that subjects felt more relaxed and were more open once the 'official' interview was over and the recorder was switched off. Generally, the quality of the data collected depended on establishing a level of trust and openness in the interviews and assuring respondents of their confidentiality and anonymity. This was crucial given the fact that people were being asked to share the personal details of

their lives, including matters about which they felt a degree of guilt, shame or embarrassment. The agreement made with interviewees was that when extracts from their accounts were used, their own name would not be given and where necessary, personal details would be obscured or changed so as to protect their identity.

The fieldwork

The area and the people

My first task in starting the fieldwork was to familiarise myself with the local area in which I intended to conduct the research. This meant, first of all, gathering documentary and survey evidence relating to the local social structure and secondly, drawing on the knowledge of existing contacts and establishing contact with various individuals and groups in the area.

In order to gain an overall picture of the area, three different sources of information were drawn upon. Firstly, census data and other statistical material showing trends and patterns within the area were examined. A profile of the local population, in terms of economic activity, levels of unemployment, housing turnover, population change and so on was obtained. Secondly, information was collected on the geographical aspects of the community, the individual neighbourhoods, boundaries and divisions within the area and the provision of services in the locality, including schools and colleges, shopping and leisure facilities, local council and neighbourhood offices, etc. Thirdly, social and political aspects of the area were examined, including the local political structure; important local issues and interest groups; and the policies and programmes affecting the area. Much of this background information was necessary in order to understand the meaning of comments made by people in the interviews.

Census data and other social surveys revealed the following features of the area. The rate of unemployment was among the highest in the city, with a figure of 28% recorded in one ward. The area had the highest rate of long-term unemployment in the Region, with 44% of the unemployed registered for more than one year. A high proportion of local residents were claiming income and housing benefits. A local survey carried out in 1991 showed that only 34% of those at working age were in full-time employment. Between 70 and 80% of the local population were dependent

on state benefits for all or part of their income and 74% of council tenants received housing benefit. According to a report carried out on poverty in the Region, the area had one of the highest percentages of children receiving free school meals because their parents were in receipt of income support (Lothian Regional Council, 1993). The same report noted that health indicators showed a generally poor level of health associated with poverty in the area.

It was these characteristics, along with the poor condition of much of the housing stock and the physical environment, which had given the area its reputation as a deprived area. The total population of Royston Park in 1991 was approximately 23000 people and had declined by nearly 20% in the last 10 years. A City Council Housing Report produced in 1991 reported a high turnover of residents in the area with the majority of new tenancies being allocated to people on the homeless waiting list. Despite a decline in the Local Authority housing stock in the area, council housing accounted for 59% of local housing in 1991. This included older pre-war tenements, more desirable maisonettes with gardens and 1960s system-built deck-access and high-rise housing. Documentary and demographic evidence drawn from a breakdown of census data on a ward by ward basis indicated a generally young population with a high number of single-parent and young single person households.

Another feature of Royston Park which emerged later in the interviews was that it was not perceived by local people as a single, cohesive area. As far as local people were concerned, there existed at least five distinct neighbourhoods within Royston Park, reflecting the various stages and patterns of house building in the area. Three neighbourhoods - Blackmuir, Milton and Glenside - were commonly perceived as the more deprived, a fact born out by census and employment data. Residents in these areas were often depicted as difficult tenants, 'junkies' and 'problem' families. Craiglea and Westwood, which were located on the periphery of the scheme, were seen as more desirable because of their geographical position, the quality and tenure of housing and their perceived lack of social problems. The residents of these neighbourhoods, which contained a much greater proportion of private housing, were often characterised by others in the area as unfriendly, snobby and distant.

These social distinctions weakened any strong sense of identification with the area as a whole. Opinions varied as to whether there was a greater sense of co-operation and cohesiveness within Royston Park since the establishment of a specific anti-poverty programme for the area as a whole. Incidents between rival teenage gangs from

different parts of the area suggested that territorial identity remained important for some young people. Inter-neighbourhood rivalry also took the form of hostility between council tenants and private residents or resentment at the level of improvements or facilities in some areas compared to others. For example, in one area of mainly council housing an island of owner-occupied housing had been created a few years ago. This had created resentment among local tenants towards the residents of the private houses, especially as they felt that change had been imposed from outside and their own views ignored.

The local economy was not dominated by any one major industry or company. There had been a steady decline in local economic activity with the down-sizing or closure of most of the older engineering firms and several other companies that traditionally employed local people. This process of decline increased through the seventies and eighties and led to a sharp rise in unemployment in the area. This process continued unabated up until the mid-80s, with local residents blaming the District Council for failing to tackle the problems in the area. At the same time there was a worsening of conditions in many parts of the scheme and increasing social and physical problems associated with much of the housing. A growing problem of drugs and heroin abuse and a high incidence of HIV and AIDS further increased the area's negative reputation and the general stigma attached to living there.

It was concern about the poor housing conditions and lack of facilities and services which led to the area's designation as a Priority Area. In recent years, several programmes of housing improvement had been undertaken. This had brought about a gradual change in tenure patterns, with an increase in housing association and private dwellings. It had also encouraged a proliferation of small urban aid funded projects scattered throughout the locality, promoting a range of community-based activities from art and drama groups and pensioners' clubs to childcare provision and welfare rights agencies.

Gaining access

There were a number of potential difficulties to be overcome in carrying out the research as planned. Identifying and contacting households willing to participate in the study was the most immediate problem. I considered knocking on doors at random and asking people to participate in the study. But I was doubtful that people

would respond to approaches made by a complete stranger at their door, especially if they were being asked to contribute to a study which involved sharing the personal details of their lives. I felt that the best way forward was to attempt to approach various community groups and organisations in the area and to ask for their help in putting me in touch with individuals.

Gaining access in this study depended less on securing the approval of official gate-keepers and more on winning the confidence of various informal gate-keepers in the area. In the case of Royston Park, because of its size and historical development, there existed no single umbrella group which could be approached with a view to securing some kind of unofficial blessing or approval for the research. There were however, a number of smaller, more localised community organisations and representative bodies and a handful of individual activists with whom it was expedient to make contact before commencing fieldwork. As a first step, I contacted as many of these as possible in order to explain my research interests and plans and to ask for assistance in finding people willing to be interviewed. Many gave practical advice and information and recommended particular individuals and groups that I might contact.

Finding out about the range of voluntary organisations operating in the area was not difficult as a directory of local groups and the services they provided had recently been drawn up. I attempted to identify those groups which offered the best possibility of reaching 'ordinary' members of the community and not just those who were local activists. In practice, this meant groups and projects which were open and accessible to a wide cross-section of people. I also tried to ensure that the groups contacted covered a range of different areas and aspects of community life. They included local projects involved in welfare rights advice, health issues, employment and training, women and children's support, play activities, arts and drama and housing. It was important to draw on multiple sources in order to avoid a situation in which those interviewed belonged to the same social networks or were representative of only one section of the community or set of interests.

Among some of these organisations there appeared to be a small core group of regular users (e.g. drama groups, tenants groups and women's support groups). Others dealt with much larger numbers of casual callers requiring help of a specific kind (e.g. advice organisations). For some, the nature of their work involved dealing with one-off enquiries as well as running activities and support groups for a regular

circle of users (e.g. the local health project). The procedure I adopted was to send a short letter to each of the groups, introducing myself and explaining the topic of the research. I would follow this up with a phone call and ask to come down and talk to the workers, volunteers or helpers in person. Sometimes a visit was arranged but on other occasions, I elicited promises of assistance over the phone without the need for a meeting. In most cases, it was agreed that the workers would either approach people on my behalf or would provide me with a list of names and addresses of possible participants.

The most important factor in determining the kind of people I made contact with as a result of my representations to different local projects and groups, was the nature and conditions of access granted by project workers and other 'gate-keepers' within these organisations. There was of course some scope for project workers to select people according to their own criteria of suitability as subjects of research. It seemed unlikely for example that project workers would refer me to people currently at a point of crisis. It was also possible that they might limit their referrals to the more confident and articulate members of local groups and to those most committed to community action. However, it was found that although most of those interviewed were contacted through local projects, the majority were not involved in other groups or forms of community activity. Their participation in these groups was more often than not a means of increasing their opportunities for social contact, support and fulfilling activity.

In general, I found that most organisations were reluctant to let me approach casual callers seeking particular forms of advice or assistance. On the other hand, those organisations with a regular user group often invited me to approach people directly. On one occasion, I arranged a meeting with the project worker of a local organisation and within minutes, was shown into a room full of mothers and children and invited to address them directly and ask for their help with the study! By the time I left, I had the names and addresses of four people who had agreed to participate in the study. In retrospect, this kind of direct approach, while a little nerve-wracking, turned out to be the most effective means of contacting people. It allowed people to put a human face to an otherwise anonymous request for help and to make a decision based on their contact with the researcher. In this respect, the explicit support of workers, volunteers or activists within local projects was crucial; their willingness to vouch for the research and confer a degree of legitimacy on the researcher often proved decisive.

The organisations contacted

Over the period of a few months, I made contact with a large number of local groups and agencies in the area. Initially those groups were chosen that seemed to me to offer the best prospect of locating people willing to participate in the research. New groups were added to the list when those contacted earlier in the process proved unable to help. Details of these are given below.

Family Service Unit

This was a drop-in support and creche facility for parents with children under 5. The worker advised me to call in and speak directly to both the volunteer helpers and users of the centre. This resulted in a series of interviews with 4 women during the following week, all of which took place in a room in the premises.

Job Advice Centre

The centre served as an informal job advice facility which differed in many ways from a conventional job centre. The manager was a local man, well-known and respected in the area, who had a good relationship with many of the clients. He was able to combine his job advice with more informal efforts to match people to appropriate vacancies. From my point of view, he was a mine of information and I passed much time in the centre simply chatting about and exchanging views on a number of local issues.

Initially I approached the Job Advice Centre to ask if they could help me to contact people who had recently found employment. The manager did supply the names and addresses of 4 individuals and suggested I write to them explaining the research and asking if they would agree to take part in interviews. But only one of my reply slips was returned, with an unambiguous 'no'. The manager explained that he was limited in the help he could give me because he had already agreed to assist another researcher. Quite sensibly, he felt that the presence of two researchers competing to interview people as they walked in the door would be too intrusive.

Over time, I became a frequent visitor to the centre and eventually I was introduced to two people who agreed to be interviewed. Ironically, one of these was the man who had earlier returned the reply slip, declining to be interviewed. This experience confirmed my belief that personal approaches were usually more effective than

anonymous, written requests and that this was especially so when local workers were able to smooth the path and put in a favourable word.

Welfare Rights Organisations

There were two advice agencies in Royston Park and I went to visit both prior to starting the fieldwork in order to discuss the research. They were able to tell me much about the kinds of problems experienced by people in the area who came for advice. But neither was able to help in terms of contacting people who might agree to participate in the research. Despite a sympathetic response to the research, there was a general feeling that it was unfair to approach people who had come into the office for confidential help and advice.

Blackmuir Arts and Drama Association

The arts centre was not only a facility for arts and drama but served as an important focal point for the local community. As well as organising a range of activities and clubs, it acted as a local information and resource centre and a meeting place for various groups. The project leader was herself a local resident. She was politically active and a committed campaigner on behalf of the community. She was happy for me to approach people directly in the centre and introduced me to a small group of regular users and left me to talk to them. A total of four people agreed to be interviewed, although one later had to drop out.

An important issue arose during the course of my visit here. This concerned the fact that a number of people in the project had recently been interviewed by another researcher who had approached the centre a few months before. Those who had participated in that research were unhappy about the way the interviews had been conducted and felt they had been manipulated by the researcher. This raised certain practical and ethical questions for me. Was it appropriate to use this project as a source of interviewees? Was I adding to a potential problem of 'research fatigue' in the area? Would this previous bad experience of research have a detrimental effect on my own work?

I discussed these questions frankly with people in the centre, and spoke to workers, volunteers and users of the project. Some were reluctant to be interviewed again after their previous experience and a number of others were wary as a result. But most people supported local research, especially where it drew attention to the needs and lack of resources in the area. On the whole, they did not feel that the amount of

research conducted in the area had created a condition of research fatigue or that I, by my presence, was about to contribute to that. More important factors were involved, such as the sensitivity with which the research was conducted, the ability to listen to people and not to judge or label them and the effort to build a relationship with local people and community organisations.

After serious consideration, I decided to proceed with the research as planned and to continue to ask local organisations to assist me in finding participants, rather than changing my approach, or more drastically, the area I had selected. But when contacting local projects I did enquire whether they had been in touch with other researchers and what their experience had been. In raising these questions, I generally found that people were supportive of research which would give the viewpoint of local residents.

Community Health Project

Initial contact was made by telephone and the project leader agreed to help with my request and to approach individuals on my behalf. There was some discussion about whether my own research might be able to look at certain issues of interest to the health project. Although no strong basis for reciprocity was established, help was forthcoming and the project worker set up three interviews for me with users of the project.

Community Minister

Despite favourable reports on the work of the local community minister my approach by telephone was met by wariness and suspicion. He declared himself hostile to 'research on the poor' and expressed a concern to protect local people from researchers. One of his main tasks, he stated, was to assist and attend to the needs of local people who were especially vulnerable, in a state of crisis or unable to cope. In his opinion, the last thing that local people needed was a researcher prying into their lives, unearthing stories of tragedy and unhappiness. On this basis, he declined to meet me to discuss the research or to help in any way.

Credit Union

The development worker was away on holiday when I wrote. However, I spoke to one of the volunteers who promised to approach people on my behalf and sent me a list of names and telephone numbers. I contacted these people and three of them agreed to be interviewed. In the end, I interviewed only one of these. One couple

who initially agreed, later changed their minds after a frustrating series of last minute cancellations, one due to illness, and two arranged meetings at which the other party did not appear. In fact, the experience of arranging interviews and finding that the other person did not turn up at a particular meeting place, was a fairly common occurrence. Sometimes, it was apparent that the person had experienced a last-minute change of mind and therefore stayed away. At other times, people genuinely forgot or found themselves unable to make the meeting time due to a hectic and demanding lifestyle and young children to care for which absorbed all their energies.

These represent only some of the local organisations that I contacted. Others included a mother and toddler group, a childcare group, a neighbourhood centre and various single issue or activity groups. I also arranged meetings with several key individuals in the community who were prominent in local groups and actively involved in various management committees. Their willingness to help and their access to extensive networks of informal associations and contacts rarely seemed in practice to produce subjects for the research. One or two interviews owed more to luck and being in the right place at the right time, than to conscious planning. In one case, a trip to the local shopping centre with a worker in a local project resulted in a chance meeting with a woman she had occasionally spoken to in the supermarket. Within five minutes, she had set up an interview with this woman.

The following table summarises how those interviewed for the study were contacted.

Family Service Unit	4
Job Advice Centre	2
Arts and Drama Association	2
Community Health Project	3
Credit Union	1
Mother and toddlers club	1
Neighbourhood Centre	1
Local Women's project	1
Contacted through local project worker	1

Methodological and theoretical issues raised by the fieldwork.

At the end of four months I had completed only 10 interviews. I had contacted numerous individuals and organisations in the area, but it was proving much more difficult than I had envisaged to find people willing to participate in the study. Approximately half of those who were referred by organisations or individuals dropped out, changed their minds, did not make appointments and so on. It was becoming clear that the approach I had adopted was unlikely to produce many more interviewees without a great deal of time and effort. This was compounded by the fact that the research strategy I had adopted relied heavily on local organisations playing an intermediary role which then reduced my own control over the identification and selection of those I interviewed.

Initially, I had also tried to restrict the study to people within certain types of households, namely, families with young children. This had the effect of reducing the size of the pool of people potentially available for the study. In practice it was difficult to identify whether subjects were members of households with dependent children without first asking a series of questions about their family circumstances. It was virtually impossible to gain details of people's household circumstances in advance of conducting the interviews. As a result, some of those that I had interviewed were in fact living in single person households, their children having grown up and departed from the household some time ago

At times, I became painfully aware of my dependence on the assistance and goodwill of the workers and volunteers in these groups and of my inability to hasten the process of setting up interviews. Once I had made the initial approach to groups or organisations and discussed the research with workers, the process of finding and contacting people to participate in the study rested in their hands. In this respect, I was to a large extent reliant upon their interpretation of my requirements for the study. In a number of cases, people were referred to me by local organisations who did not fit the types of household I was looking for; but it was too difficult to turn people away once they had offered to take part in the interviews.

The fieldwork strategy therefore faced two main problems. First, finding people willing to participate in the study was turning out to be an extremely slow and time-consuming process. Second, many of those who were interviewed, did not fall within the group I had specified, because of the difficulty in screening individuals prior to conducting the interviews. In the light of this, I had to decide if I should persist in trying to limit the study to people within households of a particular type, as I had

originally set out to do, or whether I should widen the research to include individuals within a range of household situations? If I decided on the former, I would have to seek other ways and means of locating suitable subjects for the research. If I took the latter course, I would then be dealing with a much wider range household types, experiences and circumstances. Given the small numbers involved, it would be impossible to detect patterns related to particular household types or to compare across cases in any meaningful way.

For pragmatic reasons I decided that I should extend the study to include people in a range of household types. Otherwise, I would continue to struggle to find subjects and would have to exclude some of those I had already interviewed because they did not fit into the required household type. My original rationale for restricting the study to a sample of individuals from a certain household type was that I would be able to present their experiences, conditions, attitudes and responses as representative of such households in poverty. But over time, I began to question the value and appropriateness of this approach. The combination of methodological problems on the one hand and the emergence of certain themes and patterns in the interviews pointed to the need for a fundamental rethink of the research strategy and design.

Increasingly, the issues which I felt were important and worth exploring in detail concerned the ways in which people identified themselves and represented their experiences in their accounts. I was sometimes struck by the different meanings that people attached to particular conditions, groups and states. I also became interested in how people in various situations and with very different life-histories and experiences, understood and employed terms like poverty in relation to their own lives and those of other people. Thus, I focused on the meanings that were conveyed in people's descriptions of their lives and experiences. In this way, I began to re-evaluate the nature of the claims that could be made in a small-scale interpretative study of this kind. More specifically, it struck me that the attempt to confine the study to households of a particular type was bound up with the notion of a representative sample which belonged to a positivist paradigm and was inappropriate in this study.

I began to make fresh approaches to local groups and to speak again to some of those I had previously contacted. This resulted in a further 6 interviews over the next two months. However, it remained the case that local people were generally reluctant to

participate in the study. I was interested in understanding the reasons for this and whether those who had agreed to take part shared particular characteristics which distinguished them from other local residents. Was it possible that the particular methods I used to contact subjects influenced the kinds of people I interviewed? In relying on project workers to recommend particular individuals, what kind of screening of potential subjects took place? For example, what was the likelihood that local workers and activists selected subjects whom they felt would give the 'right' impression to an outside interviewer, such as those who were more active and articulate? Of course, not everyone who participated in the study was referred or recommended by project workers. But even where this was not the case, it was possible that those who volunteered themselves were among the more confident, articulate or self-assured members of the community or were those who possessed greater personal and financial resources.

From the point of view of respondents, there was a real sense in which their participation in these interviews meant exposing their lives to the researcher, with the attendant risk of being judged (or judging themselves) inadequate, dependent or unable to cope. Before taking part, respondents would most likely have made some assessment of the risks involved for them of being exposed, condemned or blamed by the interviewer. In some cases they would have had the chance to meet me before deciding whether to participate or not and so would have been able to form some opinion of my character and sympathies. Approaches made through a letter, on the other hand, gave people little basis on which to make these kinds of assessments. In this case they could only take a chance or be guided by the comments of workers or other people who had been interviewed.

It seemed likely that local project workers were also aware of the 'risks' for those participating in the research and so selected only those whom they considered self-confident, strong in character and less troubled by feelings of inadequacy or guilt. If so, this might have important implications in terms of the ability to formulate more general theoretical propositions based on these interviews. It was therefore essential to consider the question of whether the selection process produced an exceptional group of respondents. For example, were they more likely to include individuals who were self-assured and confident in their ability to withstand any suggestion of personal criticism, blame or inadequacy that might be levelled at them? If this was the case, then which kinds of people would be more likely to take part in the research? The more actively involved members of the local community as opposed

to those who felt socially isolated and detached? Or those who were more financially secure and able to cope, rather than those who were struggling against debt, drug problems or depression?

It was true that most of the subjects did describe themselves in the interviews as actively and successfully coping within the financial constraints that they faced. This was accompanied by emphatic assertions of their ability to manage their affairs successfully. This might seem to confirm the view that those interviewed were better off and more able to cope than other local residents. On the other hand, we have to consider if these expressions of well-being and coping were reflected in their actual financial and material circumstances, or whether they were simply elements of the protective armour of respondents under interview conditions. This is a question that I discuss more fully in the next chapter, when I examine the relationship between the material circumstances of respondents and their subjective sense of well-being. However, my overall impression was that such expressions of well-being were not incompatible with the experience of poverty and material hardship and should not be taken as evidence of greater financial security or capability among those interviewed.

It is also worth pointing out that among the sixteen individuals who took part in these interviews, there was great variation in their material, household, income and employment situations. They included people in paid work and those reliant on benefits; families with children and people who lived alone; young people and old; and people in different financial circumstances. Most noteworthy was the fact that the vast majority of subjects were women while only 3 of the participants were men. This undoubtedly reflected the techniques by which people were contacted, through informal social networks and local community groups and organisations. Many of the latter were projects concerned with family welfare, health and childcare - areas in which women are generally more prominent.

Among the women interviewed, 6 were single mothers. In one case, the children had recently left school and were now employed, although they still lived at home. Of the rest, 4 women lived in two parent households and 3 lived alone. All three men lived in joint households with their partners and dependent children. In terms of their current employment status, the majority of subjects were not economically active at the time of interview. 9 lived in households in which no one was in employment. A further 2 were themselves unemployed but lived in a household in which someone

worked. Of those who worked, 2 were in full-time employment, 2 were in part-time jobs and one person was doing a combination of jobs which added up to full-time engagement in paid work. These details are provided in Appendix 1.

Interpreting the data - the language and meaning of poverty

When I began the research I conceptualised poverty as an objective condition which could be identified in a person's life given sufficient details of their living conditions, resources, opportunities for social activity and advancement and so on. One of the aims of the interviews was to collect data, based on people's own accounts of their life-styles and living conditions from which it would be possible to make inferences about their experience of poverty. In particular, I would seek to document the patterns and periods of poverty experienced by people over the course of their lives and seek to identify the causes and duration of periods of poverty over time. At the same time, I would look at how subjects' own perceptions and feelings of well-being corresponded to the particular objective conditions of poverty that they experienced and were related to changes in their material and household circumstances.

However, after conducting a small number of interviews, I began to feel that something was happening in these interviews that hindered my ability to construct a picture of people's experience of poverty over time. The conceptual distinction that I had made between people's objective conditions and their subjective feelings and perceptions seemed much less clear in people's own accounts of their lives. At an early stage in the interviews, it became apparent that respondents did not simply describe or report their experiences in a factual way, but interpreted and attached meanings to them in order to sustain a particular self-conception. It was proving impossible to split the 'concrete' events and circumstances of people's lives from the meanings, cultural values and reference points which they used in constructing accounts of who they were as individuals.

Whenever I tried to find out more about the causes and consequences of poverty in people's lives, I seemed to hit a brick wall. As I show in the next chapter, people's accounts of their lives were constructed in ways which resisted classification with reference to conventional categories and definitions of poverty. Their accounts also challenged the assumption that people could be categorised as poor in some neat and

unambiguous way, by reference to their social and material circumstances. On one level, their reports of the financial difficulties, material circumstances and levels of hardship they had experienced over the course of their lives, strongly suggested that they were poor or had experienced poverty in the past. And yet in most cases respondents did not look back and describe particular periods of poverty or refer to specific incidents or events which had resulted in them being poor. In fact respondents rarely employed the language of poverty in speaking about their own experiences of hardship.

Similarly, questions intended to explore the correspondence between subjective assessments of well-being and objective conditions of poverty were met by a certain defensiveness in the way that individuals described periods of financial hardship or difficulty. Gradually I began to see that the tendency to deny, hide or play down the true extent of the difficulties they experienced revealed a desire to avoid being found 'poor'. In their eyes, to be identified as 'poor', was not simply a matter relating to their living standards or material resources, but a threat to their identity and self-image and an indication of failure, incapacity and hopelessness. Thus people employed various defences and forms of resistance in the interviews as a means to reduce the likelihood of being seen as poor. On the few occasions when respondents accepted that they were in poverty, they qualified this view with statements that affirmed their own personal competence and dissociated themselves from the conditions they presently experienced

As a result, these interviews became more interesting for what they revealed about the self-presentation of respondents, than as reports of the conditions of poverty experienced by people over the course of their lives. Read as 'stories', the accounts were fascinating, full of contradictions and unexpected interpretations of events and attempts to make sense and find positive signs and virtues in the face of tremendous privation or hardship. One aspect of this, which quickly became apparent, was the lack of correlation between their reports of the material and social deprivations they experienced at various times in their life and the subjective perception of themselves as poor. The people I interviewed appeared to possess a set of images and ideas about what it meant to be poor, who the poor were, why they were poor and so on. It was by reference to these images of poverty, rather than some standard of material hardship or relative deprivation, that they defined themselves and others as poor. For this reason, their statements on poverty often appear inconsistent and ambiguous. In

the following extract, for example, quite different meanings of the word 'poor' are apparent.

> I'm poor. But I dunnie feel poor... cause I can live with it. I think it's most folk that cannae manage, and I've been through it, that find it really hard... but I don't find it hard at all. (Fiona)

My attention therefore started to shift towards the discursive forms and practices used by respondents in talking about their lives and how these related to the discourses on poverty that were commonly employed in the public domain. I began to detect a recurring set of themes and ideas in their accounts. The issue which emerged most strongly concerned the way in which respondents felt themselves identified by other people (including the researcher) as 'poor' and how this conflicted with their own self-image and perception of their lives, which they presented in the interviews. This was manifest in a concern to distance themselves from those they saw as poor and to emphasise their ability to manage their everyday lives in difficult circumstances. The denial of poverty, in the face of material evidence to the contrary, suggested that their understanding of what it meant to be poor was informed by particular meanings and values attached to the term.

Problems concerning the language and meaning of poverty had first come to light in the early stages of the fieldwork in the course of explaining the research to various organisations and individuals in the area. I had used the term poverty extensively in a number of papers I had written sketching out the details of the research I wished to conduct. But I had not considered to what extent the term might be problematic or ambiguous in the social context of a 'deprived' estate. It was only later, when I entered the field and began to discuss the research with people on the ground, that I became aware of a certain discomfort in using the word, as if it somehow labelled or categorised people in a way that they might find offensive. I realised that local residents, community activists and project workers generally avoided referring to the area or to local people as 'poor'. When people did use the term poverty, it was applied in a rather unspecified and abstract way to indicate a general social problem or issue and therefore located at a distance from their own personal lives.

These initial perceptions led me to ask respondents how they themselves defined poverty and who they thought of as poor. In this way, I tried to get a sense of the values and frames of reference which informed their understanding and use of the term poverty, both as an aspect of their own lives and in terms of those they

identified as poor. I found different and sometimes contradictory interpretations of poverty according to the particular individuals, groups or aspects of experience that they described. This frustrated all attempts to establish a consistent meaning or definition. I sensed that for local residents, poverty was regarded as an alien term, used by 'outsiders' in order to categorise other people or problems in a certain way. It appeared to place them in a particular relationship with the rest of society in which they were cast as the passive and dependent recipients of a series of social interventions. They themselves employed a different terms, standards and reference points in describing the material and social conditions of their lives and in identifying their social position and status.

Michel Foucault wrote a great deal on the subject of discourse that is relevant to the way in which the people in this study seemed to use and understand the term poverty (Foucault, 1972, 1979). He argued that language does not simply refer to objects which are taken to be given in reality. The objects of discourse are constituted in discourse according to the rules of some discursive formation rather than existing independently and simply being referred to or talked about in a particular discourse. Thus language constructs meanings for reality through discourse. For Foucault, discourse constitutes the objects of knowledge (in this case, 'poor people'); social subjects and forms of 'self'; and social relationships and conceptual frameworks. The social subject that produces a statement does not exist outside of and independently of discourse but is a function of the statement.

The contention is that people's discursive practices are shaped by social relations, structures and practices which serve to position them in particular ways as subjects. To understand this involves looking at how social identities and the 'self' are constructed in discourse. The use of particular discourses on poverty serves to position the 'self' in a particular relationship to those who are the objects of discourse. Fairclough expresses this in the following words 'statements position subjects - those who produce them, but also those they are addressed to - in particular ways' (Fairclough, 1992). However, as he also makes clear, social subjects are not passively positioned but are capable of acting as agents and of negotiating their relationship with the various types of discourse they are drawn into. They enter into a process of re-shaping and restructuring the terms and boundaries of the discourse in order to engage in talk about poverty and 'the poor' as problems 'out there'.

The location of poverty at a distance from their own life takes place within a particular discursive framework in which the speaker, as a normal member of society, is contrasted to 'the poor', who are presented as 'other'. 'The poor' as a discursive construct become an important reference point in establishing their own place as respectable members of society. Within this discursive formation, talk on poverty centres less on the actual social and material conditions endured by people and more on the distinctive personal characteristics and social identity which distinguish 'the poor' from the rest of society. As a result, poverty is understood chiefly as a matter relating to social position and identity. Those described as poor are consigned to a negative social category which derives less from their social and material resources and more from their subordinate relationship with other members of society.

Increasingly, I felt that to explore the experience of poverty simply as a matter of material hardship or social deprivation was to miss a crucial issue: how poverty was constituted in terms of a particular identity and subjectivity and how this was structured through sets of social relations and practices which cemented the identification of individuals and groups as poor. What began to emerge was a conception of poverty as a moral category, in which those classified as 'poor' were identified by their personal failure and weakness. From this perspective, the forms of self-representation employed by people in their accounts appeared to serve particular social functions. They were a response to doubts about their personal identity and moral adequacy which arose in the context of an exclusionary discourse on poverty in which to be poor was to be assigned to a distinct social category.

Analysing the data and questions of validity

At the start of this chapter, I commented that analysis of the data took place throughout the process of carrying out the fieldwork and was not simply left until the data collection was completed. This methodological approach, which drew on a style of research described as 'grounded theory' (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Hammersley, 1983; Turner, 1981), allowed me to develop certain themes and patterns that emerged in the interviews and to test and explore them further in subsequent interviews. The research process involved a continuous engagement in and interaction with the data as it was produced in these interviews. In the course of conducting the interviews it was inevitable that I formed certain impressions about

what was being said and a gradual development of my thoughts and ideas took place. Thus the research developed as an interactive process in which the tasks of recording, transcribing and interpreting the data occurred simultaneously. Even before the interviews had been completed and a more careful scrutiny and analysis of the data had been undertaken, I had already identified a number of themes that seemed central to people's accounts.

While a large number of books and texts have been written on the subject of data analysis, only a small proportion of these deal specifically with the analysis of qualitative data (e.g. Walker, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1984). It is clear that one of the essential tasks of qualitative analysis is to seek to classify data on which very little order has previously been imposed (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This usually means extracting sections of data which appear to have a particular meaning and significance and grouping these under different headings (Jones, 1985). In my case, it was clear that analysis of the data would centre primarily on the search for underlying meanings, patterns and themes both within and between different people's accounts. It was therefore essential to get behind people's rationalisations, look for contradictions and inconsistencies and seek relationships in order to clarify the main themes and ideas, which might then form the basis of theoretical propositions. But in practice, this was not an easy task. How was I to begin working on this mass of interview data, to establish suitable categories as a means of identifying patterns, themes and relationships within the data and to interpret and make sense of these in terms of a coherent theoretical analysis?

My data was collected in the form of a number of tape-recorded interviews. My first task was to convert these into a form which would facilitate reading, coding and sorting. I therefore set about the arduous task of transcribing the interviews using a personal computer. Although my initial intention was to reproduce the texts of the interviews in full, I found it expedient to undertake a certain amount of editing in order to save time. Long digressions on subjects which I judged to be irrelevant were edited down to a few words summarising the content of the conversation at that point. The final transcripts still ran into well over two hundred pages of printed paper.

The bulk of the analysis was in fact carried out using pen and paper. I first of all read through all the transcripts making comments in the margin and jotting down various ideas and interesting points on a separate piece of paper. I then produced a set of

notes for each person interviewed, which included a summary of their 'story' and details of any puzzling comments or striking ideas that appeared. These notes then served as a thematic record of each account so that reading through each in turn helped to identify recurrent themes and topics in the accounts. Certain themes and topics had already emerged and been noted while still conducting the interviews and these provided a starting point for analysis. Key issues identified at an early stage included people's modes of self-presentation, ideas of moral responsibility and self-sacrifice in relation to work and family, forms of identity and group membership, stories of successful struggles engaged in and coping strategies developed.

I then returned to the transcripts and all bits of talk relating to these topics were pulled out and placed in a category with a suitable heading. Thus sections of data were grouped under headings with names such as 'managing', 'strategies', 'hard-times', 'agency', 'identity', 'moral responsibility' and 'other people'. Once the categories had been established, the process of sorting and managing the data was carried out by computer. Although no specific programmes for qualitative analysis were used, the process was enhanced by use of the computer's key-word function to search for certain key concepts, allowing quick access to all conversation involving particular terms. In this way, terms such as 'poverty' and 'poor' could be located across accounts, making it possible to examine the contrasting ways in which people spoke about poverty in different situations and at different times and how this related to their talk on other topics.

However, I was conscious of the drawbacks of this approach. It was possible that important insights might be lost through fragmenting and coding the data into more manageable bits in order to compare the treatment of topics across accounts. In addition, this process took little account of the context in which comments were made and provided no basis for understanding how ideas and meanings actually fitted together within individual accounts. As well as comparing bits of data across different accounts, it was therefore necessary to locate their meaning and function within each individual account. Subsequently, for each respondent a 'case-record' was drawn up as a means of sorting and managing the data relevant to each 'case'. These case records were produced by condensing the case data, including significant quotes, in sufficient detail so that analysis could be conducted without constantly checking back to the full transcripts.

Most of the time I was working simultaneously with two classification systems. In one, data collected from all the accounts was organised in a series of categories reflecting the most important themes and issues. The other consisted of a set of individual case records, detailing the relationships and interconnections between topics within each account. In combination it was possible to examine the contradictions and inconsistencies identified within individual accounts and to compare these across cases in a systematic way. For example, in some cases, it was observed that despite providing accounts of hardship and financial difficulty, respondents went to great lengths to emphasise that their situation was not so bad and that they managed much better than other households in comparable situations. This could be compared across cases by examining the data collected under the categories of 'managing' and 'hard-times' and by looking for possible relationships and patterns between these and other categories, such as 'capability', 'moral adequacy' and 'personal agency and control'.

The process of interpreting the data therefore involved these two distinct forms of analysis: comparing items and themes across cases, such as how people spoke about certain experiences or situations; and searching for patterns and inconsistencies within cases, by exploring the relationship between meanings and responses. The most difficult aspect of this was deciding which particular comments, observations and pieces of data were significant and constituted a fruitful line of enquiry and which were interesting but not central to the main themes of the study. It was constantly necessary to return to the 'raw-data' in order to check the frequency of certain patterns and to confirm particular interpretations I had made. There was a danger that initially striking impressions and findings, which appeared to have 'emerged' out of the data, took on more importance than was justified. It was also possible that a particular interpretation or treatment of the data might be accepted without a rigorous search for negative cases or alternative explanations.

It was therefore essential to give some thought to the factors affecting the validity and plausibility of the findings if the particular arguments developed in the research were to be convincing. This meant directing attention to the basis on which decisions were made about who to interview, how subjects were to be selected and contacted and the topics covered in the interviews. Earlier in the chapter, I tried to explain the decisions and concerns that influenced the design of the research. It was also necessary to give some thought to the process of analysis and to various factors that

could undermine the validity of the research and weaken the explanations and arguments advanced.

The validity of qualitative research

One problem of small-scale studies of the kind carried out here is the weak basis for making wider claims based on statistical inference. A commonly perceived shortcoming of these studies is that they rely on the interpretative understanding and analysis of the researcher, rather than on the presentation of 'hard data'. Because they deal with small populations, they are seen as limited in their ability to shed light on wider patterns and experiences of poverty in British society. Intensive forms of research can therefore suffer from a credibility problem. Findings based on the patterns and correlations established among a small number of individuals are sometimes treated with scepticism. It is much easier to dismiss the findings of these studies as unclear, not proven or open to misinterpretation, especially when they appear to contradict the 'hard' evidence generated by statistical analysis.

One reason for this is the perceived failure of intensive research to meet the criterion of validity and to demonstrate the forms of proof employed in judging the reliability of more quantitative studies. In social survey research, the important elements of validity are: the representativeness of the accounts or events described, the kinds of questions that are asked and whether they create the evidence that is required, the ability to codify answers so that responses can be compared between groups and the means of selecting representative individuals and gaining access (Sayer, 1984). Research is guided by the formulation of hypotheses which are then tested in the research and their truth and validity are demonstrated. Notions of validity centre on specific aspects of the methodology such as the reliability of the data and characteristics of theory such as empirical content, internal consistency and generality.

These criteria derive from a view of research which seeks to establish procedures to define, count and analyse variables as a means of getting at social facts. However the same criteria are sometimes employed in assessing the validity and credibility of more qualitative forms of research. Hammersley, for example, suggests that the validity of qualitative research rests on the plausibility and the credibility of the claims made and on the evidence provided to support these claims (Hammersley,

1991). But how do we assess the plausibility and credibility of claims, especially in cases where the findings appear to conflict with common-sense ideas on the subject? Hammersley appeals to notions of truth: 'By validity I mean truth: interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers' (Hammersley, 1991 p57). Underlying this approach is a view of qualitative research that assumes the existence of an objective reality and which sees the purpose of research as the faithful representation of this reality.

In some kinds of study, a central issue in assessing the validity of the findings is whether people's accounts of their beliefs and actions can be taken as a reliable indicator of what they in fact do. The issue of reliability is concerned with the extent to which people's accounts and descriptions of their circumstances are based on selective memories of the past or re-interpretations of their actions which show them in a more favourable light. For example, respondents may exaggerate or play down the level of hardship they experienced in the past. However, the accounts produced in this study were not meant to be read as factual reports of what happened in a world 'out there'. The validity of the claims made in this study did not therefore rest upon demonstrating the 'truth' of people's accounts as an indication of what really happened.

Issues of validity in the context of this study are bound up with the question of how interview data are read and interpreted. What is more important than the reliability of the data is whether it can support the kinds of interpretation produced. Lacking quantitative means for assessing the significance of beliefs or actions, the researcher must select the themes, issues and statements that he or she considers most important. Thus, using the same data base, one researcher might focus attention on the forms of hardship and deprivation faced by subjects, a second might choose to highlight the active coping strategies adopted by people on low incomes and a third might concentrate on the ways in which people seek to manipulate systems of welfare provision. Research findings are created out of the data through a process of selection and interpretation, rather than reflecting some inherent truth found within the data.

In considering issues of validity it is therefore important to be clear about the kinds of data produced and the nature of the theoretical claims and arguments being made. Some kinds of qualitative research may be evaluated using conventional reliability and validity criteria which rest on notions of truth. In this case, attention may be

directed at reducing the effects of researcher bias through particular forms of validation appropriate to qualitative research, such as triangulation and respondent validation. But prevailing concepts of verification based on procedures for establishing the reliability of the data, such as triangulation, are largely irrelevant in the kind of study pursued here. The validity and credibility of the findings produced in a small-scale study depend above all on an appreciation of the methodological and analytical issues underpinning the interpretative paradigm. The primary issue is not whether their accounts are true but what people are trying to convey and the ways in which they present themselves.

Fielding and Fielding (1986, p12) propose that the issue of validity is not concerned with truth, but the grounds that researchers have for making their inferences. This depends on the quality of the data collected and on the strength of the analysis and interpretation. The important questions to be asked are: Is the interpretation convincing? Are the theoretical claims well supported with evidence from individual's accounts? Are alternative interpretations considered? The researcher has to demonstrate that his or her interpretation of the data is well supported and convincing and that the patterns or relationships claimed are sufficient in number or degree to warrant the making of particular claims. This rests above all on convincing the reader that given the data collected in the research, the particular interpretation offered by the researcher is plausible and justified.

The researcher is required to lay open to view the means by which he or she has arrived at a particular interpretation, finding or conclusion. Otherwise, the findings may be seen to reflect their own subjective preferences, or worse, an ideological perspective that is dressed up as objectivity. It is important to guard against forms of bias which may lead to a wrong interpretation of the data or a tendency to select data which fits some preconceived or favoured interpretation. As a check on this, the researcher should make it clear how general or representative are the pieces of data used to provide evidence for a particular contention. This means revealing the basis on which data have been classified in a particular way and demonstrating the fit between the data and categories which form the basis of the emergent theory. The theory should provide a convincing explanation of the data and be able to account for those cases which appear to diverge from the norm. The study therefore derives its validity from the thoroughness of its analysis and the rigorous examination and search for negative cases in order to refine and develop the analysis.

A second important issue relating to the validity of the findings concerns the ability of the researcher to make wider claims and theoretical assertions based on the data produced in a small-scale study. To what extent can we use respondents' accounts as the basis for making general statements about the nature of the problems experienced by particular individuals and groups in society and how these relate to wider social and economic forces in society? C. Wright Mills argued that sociological research should never be merely descriptive of social phenomenon, but should seek out the connections between the personal troubles described by individuals and wider public issues and social structures (Mills, 1970). Is it feasible to develop a methodology which combines a focus on actors' own interpretations with a concern for theoretical analysis? How is it possible to link the expression of 'personal troubles' in these accounts with deeper public concerns and social values?

The translation of research findings into wider claims and assertions frequently depends on demonstrating the representativeness and typicality of the particular cases studied. In this respect, doubts may be raised about whether my subjects are representative of people in poverty and if their accounts are typical of poor people's views and experiences generally. However, this would misunderstand the nature of the study and the particular claims being made. There is no attempt to represent these accounts as the essential 'truth' about poverty or as revealing the 'reality' of being poor. I do not claim, for instance, that people's own subjective accounts and definitions provide a more reliable indication of poverty than objective definitions and measures. Nor do I suggest that these personal accounts can provide a basis for testing the validity or not of various ideological conceptions and popular beliefs about 'the poor'. For to do so would only strengthen the misconception that 'the poor' exist as a distinct social group who share a common experience of poverty.

The claims that I make in this study rest on the ability to relate the personal accounts of subjects to wider social structures and meanings in relation to poverty. I shall argue that the interviews provide an insight into the personal meaning of poverty for respondents which points to the existence of particular discourses on poverty. The basis for making more general theoretical assertions from a small-scale study such as this rests on the validity of the analysis and not on the representativeness of events. It is not necessary to demonstrate that the subjects of the study are genuinely poor. What is important is providing an interpretation which links the personal accounts of subjects to wider cultural values and norms and in so doing, reveals the range of social meanings and discourses on poverty and the forms of social practices and

policies directed at poor people. The key argument is that focusing on a small number of individual case-studies can help to throw light on broader theoretical issues through revealing the structures of meaning which operate in society.

Narratives and moral tales

I began to look at interviewees' accounts for what they revealed about the moral forms which gave rise to particular expressions and utterances. Accounts of hardship and deprivation, for example, were not articulated simply in order to tell the researcher about their experience of poverty. It was likely that such 'stories' provided a setting for demonstrations of the individual's resourcefulness and resilience, their coping skills and determination not to give in, all of which contributed to the depiction of themselves as actively coping and capable people. Like all stories, the events and experiences were interpreted and selected to illustrate the meanings, morals and lessons that the speaker wished to convey. To tell a tale is not simply to describe things neutrally; it is also to select those aspects considered worth 'telling', (i.e. especially instructive or indicative of the overall meaning intended by the teller).

> Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992 p1)

The analysis and interpretation of the data in this study does not follow the pattern of qualitative approaches in which first person accounts are treated as realistic descriptions of events and experiences and 'language is viewed as a transparent medium, unambiguously reflecting stable singular meanings' (Riessman, 1993 p2). Instead, language is understood as 'constitutive of reality'. People's accounts are treated as narratives or 'moral tales' in which they construct credible versions of themselves and their actions and in so doing, convey certain meanings through the discursive practices they employ. Narrative is inevitably a self-representation and these narratives can be seen as a means of bridging the gap between the ideal and the real, between self and society (Goffman, 1959). Description cannot therefore be divorced from context. Analysis centres on the nature and sources of the frame of explanation used by the interviewee and the 'realities' in which they locate themselves (e.g. see Potter and Mulkay, 1985). Attention is directed at the methods

used by actors to construct accounts of their lives and the moral forms which are displayed.

An example of this kind of approach is a study conducted by Baruch in which he interviewed the mothers of handicapped children about their experience of the medical profession in learning of their child's handicap (Baruch, 1981). A common feature of these interviews was the telling of 'atrocity' stories. Initially he was tempted to look at these stories and compare them with what really happened. But instead, he started to consider the moral forms that gave rise to these accounts. In particular, he looked at how mothers told stories in order to demonstrate their responsibility in the face of adversity. He showed that their accounts served particular functions aimed at displaying the status of morally adequate parenthood. Baruch found that with striking uniformity the parents constructed their stories as if responding to the question: 'How could they, as parents, have allowed that to happen to their child?' Interviewees addressed themselves to the issue of their appearance as moral actors, competent persons and adequate members of society.

In a similar way, I came to regard the accounts generated through my interviews essentially as narratives in which people constructed credible versions of their lives and their actions, through the deployment of particular meanings and discursive practices. These personal narratives revealed much about the construction of identity and subjectivity. My respondents were concerned to establish their own moral and respectable character by appealing to the standards of the everyday world. And yet the nature of their circumstances called into question their personal adequacy, identity and status as individuals. They addressed the issue of poverty in their lives in terms of the moral question: 'How could you have allowed yourself to become like that?' Consequently, their accounts functioned to locate themselves in the world of ordinary people and common experience in which periods of hardship and relative deprivation were overcome through individual and shared endeavour. By asserting their common membership of society they interpreted their experience in ways which distanced themselves from the social world of poor people.

The analysis and interpretation of respondents' accounts as 'narratives' also owes something to the methodological approach adopted by 'realists'. Realism assumes that the accounts collected in interviews 'reproduce and re-articulate cultural particulars grounded in given patterns of social organisation' (Silverman, 1985). From this point of view, the value of interview data does not lie in its accuracy in

terms of objective statements of sets of events, beliefs or biographical details. Instead, the statements and accounts of individuals are analysed in terms of the 'cultural particulars' they reveal. As Silverman comments,

> There are powerful cultural forces at work in such 'moral tales'. Consequently, the last thing you want to do is to treat them as simple statements of events to be triangulated with other people's accounts or observations. (Silverman, 1985).

Analysis focuses on the way in which particular subjective versions of reality reveal social structures. Baker, for example, argues that while many interview studies treat society as an external social fact, both interviewer and interviewee rely upon their common sense knowledge of social structures in order to produce 'locally adequate utterances' (Baker, 1982). A realist position sees these social structures as 'real' in the sense that they are reflected in social relations which may be hidden from (though expressed in) the perceptions of the individual. It is therefore possible to discover through these accounts the structures of meanings which underlie particular ideas, beliefs and actions and to make these explicit and relate them to wider social relations and practices in society.

According to this view, we understand and interpret people's statements by reference to the set of rules, values and social relations implicitly referred to in their accounts of their lives. 'Individual's narratives are situated in particular interactions, but also in social, cultural and institutional discourses which must be brought to bear to interpret them.' (Riessman, 1993 p61). Analysis therefore seeks to elucidate the basic notions people have about the world, society and human nature, by discovering the aims and intentions of particular actors and uncovering the sets of rules and the conceptual schemes which order experience so that it appears meaningful. This includes their ideas about the meaning and role of work, about the family and the state and about individual responsibility and achievement (Fay, 1975 p 79).

My argument is that these interviews give the researcher access to the language and discursive forms which people use to construct accounts of their lives within particular social and moral contexts. They allow the systematic study of personal experience and meaning - how events, identities and experiences have been constructed by active subjects. The structure of people's accounts and how they are organised in term of particular meanings and understandings are not determined by the nature of individual beliefs and values alone. The important point is that these

beliefs and values derive from and are shared with others in a particular cultural milieu and include the common-sense ideas and values embedded in the wider culture as well as in their immediate social environment. As well as providing us with instances of the discursive practices employed by individuals these can be linked to wider cultural and moral forms and structures of meaning in society.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to tell the 'story' of how the research took place and how my ideas and my understanding of what was happening in these interviews developed over time. The methodological approach adopted was one in which data collection, hypothesis-testing and theory building were interwoven with one another, rather than separate processes. I have tried to illustrate how the processes of analysis and interpretation took place through an interactive engagement with the data as it was produced, rather than as a separate set of techniques applied to the data once it had been collected. This resulted in some significant shifts in the design and focus of the research. I have tried to be honest in reporting the practical and methodological difficulties encountered in carrying out the fieldwork and the various changes and decisions that were made in order to overcome flaws in the original research design.

The study was intended to explore the lives of individuals living in Royston Park, an urban council housing estate widely perceived as poor and deprived. It was based on in-depth interviews conducted with individuals mostly contacted though local community organisations. My efforts to find people willing to participate in the study produced only 10 interviewees in the first six months and a further 6 thereafter. Some of the reasons for this were discussed and the possible consequences of asking local organisations to select and make approaches to people on my behalf were considered. As a result, the initial criteria used to confine the study to those of a particular household type, were dropped. However, by this time, more subtle changes in the way that I viewed the research and the data being collected had started to take place.

The initial aim was to collect data on and analyse the relationship between the objective conditions of poverty faced by individuals and the subjective experience and understanding of these conditions. One important aspect of this was the relationship between financial and material circumstances on the one hand and less

tangible and subjective dimensions of poverty on the other, including the impact on people's identity, status and social relations. I did manage to gather extensive details on the family, household and employment histories of those I interviewed, including their income at the present time and at periods in the past. Subjects were also invited to offer their own interpretations and explanations of what was happening at various stages of their lives, to express their values, beliefs and aspirations and to define and compare their conditions with those of other people and times in the past. My intention was to look at how people's subjective assessments of well-being related to their material circumstances over time.

However, in the course of these interviews, the distinction between objective and subjective dimensions became increasingly blurred so that there was a merging of 'facts' and the interpretation of these facts. One manifestation of this was that people did not recognise and categorise periods of their lives as 'poor', even though many of them described periods of extreme hardship and deprivation. The more I tried to find out about the concrete facts of poverty in people's lives, the more I hit a brick wall, as my subjects resisted the implication that they were poor. The key to understanding this apparent contradiction lay in the treatment of these interviews as 'situated narratives', in which individuals constructed past events and actions in particular ways in order to claim particular identities and to distance themselves from other identities.

My analysis of these interviews centred on two aspects of people's accounts: first, the ways in which they identified themselves through the verbal categories and discursive practices they employed; and second, the meanings that they attached to poverty and the various distinctions and labels they employed in identifying people as poor. Certain patterns and themes appeared in these accounts with a high degree of regularity. It became apparent, for example, that the maintenance of an acceptable identity as respectable and morally adequate citizens was a major concern for those facing material hardship. In the next chapter I examine how the forms of identity and self-presentation apparent in these narratives relate to culturally defined ideas and theories about the meaning of poverty. I demonstrate that underlying these accounts is an understanding of poverty as a moral category which derives from the kinds of identities and subjectivities associated with poverty and poor people.

Chapter 4. The personal meaning and experience of poverty

Introduction

This chapter looks at what it means to be poor, through the eyes of a number of individuals who live on or close to the poverty line. My interest is in how people describe situations of material hardship and how they interpret these situations in the context of their lives and aspirations as a whole. In this respect, I look at how respondents interpret the meaning of poverty in relation to their own circumstances and how they identify other people as poor. I look at how their accounts compare with popular and theoretical conceptions of poverty discussed in Chapter 2, which place an emphasis on the exclusion and marginalisation of those who have become trapped in situations of near-permanent poverty. Do local residents experience their lives as a bleak struggle to survive from day to day with little hope or chance of improving their situation? Or do they see their current difficulties as a temporary set-back rather than a permanent state of affairs?

The major theme of this chapter is therefore the subjective experience of poverty. It is based on data collected through interviews with 16 individuals all living in Royston Park, an area with high levels of unemployment, deprivation and poverty. The financial, employment and household circumstances of those interviewed vary from person to person. Six were single parent mothers, seven lived in two parent households and three were individuals living alone. Ten of those interviewed were registered unemployed or unable to work due to sickness. Of the remainder, three were engaged in full-time employment, two worked part-time and one had three separate jobs which meant that effectively she worked full-time. Household, employment and other details of those interviewed can be found in Appendix 1.

The chapter looks closely at the ways in which respondents describe their lives - the kinds of language used, their points of reference, the explanations provided and so on. Their accounts are examined for what they reveal about their values and beliefs, their sense of difference from or similarity with other people, their hopes and plans for the future, their interpretation of past events and experiences and the ways in which they perceive and identify themselves. Close attention is paid to the meanings people attach to their experiences and conditions and their ideas about how the

general public view them. How do they make sense of their lack of resources, their inferior living conditions and their limited job opportunities and what possibilities do they see for changing their circumstances in the future?

The chapter is organised around a central paradox which emerged early on in the study and was analysed more explicitly in later interviews. This concerned the fact that many of my respondents did not consider themselves to be poor, despite making statements testifying to their lack of material well-being and their struggle to make ends meet. This was particularly perplexing given that a majority of respondents appeared to be currently or previously in poverty, according to at least one common measure of poverty. Furthermore, the sense of being personally in control of their lives and the belief that they themselves were responsible for improving and changing their circumstances contrasted with the more common perception of poverty as an experience of powerlessness and exclusion. The key to understanding this apparent paradox, I shall argue, lies in recognising that at the level of personal experience, poverty is understood as a moral category relating to a person's dignity, self-image and identity and not simply as a descriptive term to the condition of material hardship.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In the first part, I look at how respondents describe their lives and specifically, how they perceive their well-being in terms of their social position and the restrictions on their personal agency. In the second section I look at the correspondence between people's assessments of their material welfare and their subjective definitions of their lives as poor or not. I examine their statements on poverty and look at how they use the term in relation to their own circumstances and those of other people. By focusing on the ambiguities and contradictions in their comments on poverty, I argue that much is revealed about subjects' understanding of what it means to be poor. Finally, I link their assertions of personal agency and control with their statements on poverty in order to show how respondents' efforts to construct a positive identity and self-image require that they distance themselves from particular kinds of identity and subjectivity that they associate with poor people.

The experience of poverty: material circumstances and well-being

At an early stage of the interviews, I was struck by how far people went out of their way to stress the positive aspects of their situation in a manner that seemed to be at odds with the actual circumstances they were describing. Two themes in particular stood out in respondents' accounts. First, respondents continually emphasised their scope for personal agency and their sense of having control over their circumstances. Second, they possessed a strong belief in their capacity to improve their situation over time. Respondents appeared to interpret the events and circumstances of their lives in ways which differed from my own perception of their situation and my understanding of what it meant to be poor. If people were experiencing poverty, it was not in the form and manner that I had expected.

In order to clarify this point, it is worth looking for a moment at my own understanding of what it meant to be poor. I saw poverty as involving a significant reduction in well-being experienced by those whose material and social circumstances denied them access to sufficient resources. Looking back at my field notes, written at the time of carrying out the interviews, I came across the following extract which reveals something of my own ideas and assumptions about what it meant to poor. This extract is worth quoting because it shows how I came to perceive the influence of various cultural and subjective notions in the way that I identified individuals as poor.

> Initially I perceived Sheila as someone who was particularly poor and vulnerable, compared to some of those I had already interviewed. My impression of the latter was that they were on the whole coping and managing. Even though their income and living standards were low, they appeared to be on top of things (although they had perhaps not always been so). Sheila, on the other hand, came across as someone who was not coping so well, was under strain and experiencing some difficulty managing. Where did this perception come from? I realised that it was her overall appearance and manner that conjured up the image of someone who was really poor. This implied that those I'd already interviewed were not truly poor because they gave the appearance of coping. I also imagined that she, more than the others, would recognise that she was poor.
>
> I came to realise that in everyday life, almost unconsciously, I made judgements about who was poor based on certain ideas about their appearance, attitude and behaviour. I placed people into the category of poverty on the basis of what they looked like, how they behaved and so on. The construction of this category drew on cultural stereotypes of the poor as passive victims, struggling to cope, worn down by poverty, demoralised and weak. This was my perception of Sheila, the first time I met her, which led me to categorise her as someone who was really poor. The implication was that where people gave the impression of managing, of being socially competent and emotionally sound they were not 'really'

poor, even if they lacked sufficient material resources. Being poor was not simply a matter of financial and material conditions but was associated with certain behaviour, such as an inability to cope, lack of confidence, vulnerability. People had to look as if they were genuinely struggling, needy and suffering in order to be considered poor. They had to conform to a particular identity and subjectivity as poor people.

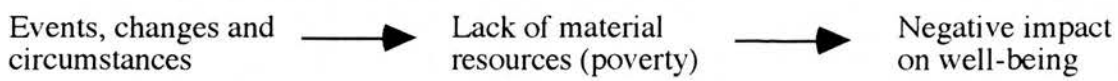
As a researcher in the field of poverty, it is all too easy to rely on subjective and cultural judgements, based on visible, material and sometimes behavioural indicators of poverty, rather than applying objective definitions of poverty. Walking into this couple's house it was easy to focus on the second-hand furniture and clothes, the bare floorboards and lack of carpets in some rooms, the rather functional and old-fashioned settee and armchairs and to match these to a notion of poverty that I held. It is tempting to associate the lack of goods with an atmosphere of hopelessness and despair. However, I was proved wrong in my assumptions. My impression of Sheila underwent a dramatic transformation as I learnt more about her during the interview. She was far more capable and confident than I had given her credit for. She worked out and decided her priorities for expenditure and developed strategies for avoiding unmanageable debt. Without that personal contact, I guess that I would have been content to slot her into the category of poor people in a way that reinforced the dominant image of poor people that I held.

When I started the interviews, my objective was to explore how respondents experienced poverty over the course of their lives. The aim was not simply to chart these periods of poverty using some pre-determined poverty-line based on income or expenditure. In fact I deliberately left open the question of how poverty should be defined so that respondents could supply their own definitions and meanings of poverty. In the interviews, I invited respondents to take me through the biographical details of their lives and asked a series of questions focusing on the changes in their employment, household and family circumstances and how these affected their social and material welfare. In addition, respondents were asked at what periods they felt best and worst-off, what their circumstances were at the time, how they perceived these periods in the context of their lives as a whole and how they compared their living standards with those of other people. By this means I hoped to relate experiences of poverty to particular events, circumstances and changes which had reduced people's access to resources and negatively affected their well-being. Their subjective definitions of poverty were also explored by asking whether they considered themselves poor in the past or at the present time.

After conducting a small number of interviews, I had already collected a mass of biographical data on people's lives. But my impression was that surprisingly little of this told me anything about the experience of poverty. I considered whether this

might have been due to some failure on my part to establish a sufficient degree of trust and rapport in the interviews. Or whether my reliance on community groups to help me contact interviewees might have produced a skewed set of participants with a bias towards the better-off or more capable and active members of the local community. But as noted in the last chapter, while some of my respondents were active in local community organisations, the majority were not. Despite frequent references in their accounts to periods of material shortage and financial struggle, it emerged that respondents did not on the whole regard themselves as poor. Nor did they construct their lives in ways which indicated that they were experiencing poverty or had done so in the past. Generally, respondents did not link their own material circumstances and experiences of social deprivation to the idea of being poor.

I therefore began to consider if there was some more fundamental flaw at the heart of the research which related to the underlying concepts and assumptions on which it was based. The research design rested on a particular framework for understanding and exploring people's experiences of poverty. This assumed the universality of a notion of poverty in terms of the constraints, hardships and problems that people experienced due to their lack of material resources and the resulting decline in their relative well-being that followed. It also supposed that subjects would identify such periods in their own lives as experiences of poverty. The aim of the interviews was therefore to relate experiences of poverty (in terms of a loss of well-being) to particular events and changes in circumstances in people's lives which had caused a lack of material resources. The underlying assumption was that poverty was experienced in terms of the following process:



However, few people described their lives in this way. When asked about the difficult periods and critical experiences of their lives, emotional, family and relationship crises were prominent in their accounts. In some cases it was apparent that these crises had resulted in a decline in people's material welfare. And yet despite this, respondents believed that their well-being was the product of their own strength of character and determination and not simply the result of adverse occurrences. Thus despite being in situations associated with a negative sense of

well-being, respondents tended to play down the impact of material deprivation and emphasised instead, their own part in improving their lives and overcoming the difficulties they faced. In the following extract, for example, Jackie says that she experienced a greater sense of well-being during periods when her material welfare was lowest. This was because she felt more in control of her life and able to affect her circumstances.

> *Looking back, [in terms of how well-off you were] what do you now see as the best and the worst periods of your life?*
> I think that was... my two marriages were the twice in my life that I was really badly off, my worst off.
> *Really, normally you expect it to be the opposite way round.*
> I mean I was really... what a bad choice of men... My second marriage, which he was in the army [inaudible] but they gave you allotment books that you cashed on a Monday... and that was your wages, sort of thing. [...] All the time I've been on my own was best, I would say it's been the best period of my life, because we've all been really close... all worked together because we've been so close and... I mean at times we were short of money and whatnot but that didnae matter because we still had each other, ken what I mean. (Jackie)

Respondents frequently expressed the view that their well-being was the result of their own personal actions and attitudes rather than the particular circumstances or level of resources that they experienced. Ann, for example, commented that in her opinion, the most important thing was to maintain the right attitude and strength of mind in the face of adverse occurrences:

> Okay, you worry about problems... everybody's got problems, but you just have to get on with it... and that's just the way I was taught to get on with life. [...] Erm... I think... I think you make your own life, you know. (Ann)

In general, respondents appeared to believe that their well-being was determined not by their level of material resources, but by other factors including their own sense of agency and control in their lives. Even if they lacked adequate resources they believed they could still affect and change their circumstances. There was a clear divergence between their accounts and my own assumptions and ideas about what people experienced in situations of poverty. My own understanding of the subjective experience of poverty assumed a sense of powerlessness and insecurity due to

circumstances which reduced people's access to resources, manifest as a loss of well-being. There were relatively few cases where respondents described their material circumstances as having a direct impact on their well-being, in a way that correlated with this view of poverty. To the contrary, people were telling me that they remained in control of their circumstances.

There were several possible explanations for this. One was that respondents were not actually poor. It was useful therefore to try and compile some data on their material resources in order to assess what proportion of those interviewed were poor in terms of objective measures of poverty. In earlier chapters, I discussed the lack of an agreed definition of poverty and the flaws and short-comings in the standard measures used. There was clearly no definitive standard of poverty that I could apply. However, using income as a proxy for poverty it was possible to offer some assessment of whether respondents were in poverty. In the course of the interviews I attempted to record all sources of income received by respondents allowing for any extra benefits and earnings and taking into account various deductions for repayments of fuel debts, social fund loans, community charge, etc.

An indication of whether or not respondents were in poverty could be gained by employing one commonly used definition of poverty. Adjusting for household size, this takes the current level of Income Support as a standard of poverty so that those with an income on or below this level are regarded as poor. A further standard, using 140% of Income Support (IS) levels was used to indicate households on the margins of poverty. A breakdown of the income and employment circumstances of the 16 respondents at the time of the interview is given below (see table overleaf).

On the basis of this measure, we can say that 7 respondents, all of whom were dependent on Income Support as their sole source of income, were in income poverty at the time of the interview. A further 5 respondents received an income that placed them on the margins of poverty. This included 4 people on Income Support who received an extra source of income and one person in employment, but on a low wage. Finally, 4 respondents had an income well above the poverty line and were not regarded as poor at the time of the interview.

This data refers to respondents' current situation. When we take into account their circumstances in the past, it emerges that 7 out of the 9 respondents not currently in poverty have experienced periods of poverty in their lives, normally as a result of

unemployment and dependence on state benefits. Thus we can say that 14 out of the 16 respondents had experienced poverty for some period in their adult lives. The remaining 2 had both experienced life on the margins of poverty.

Income ≤ 100% IS level	Income ≤ 140% > 100% IS level	Income > 140% IS level
3 people were unemployed and received income at IS level 4 people received income below IS level due to weekly deductions made at source	1 person in part time employment 2 single parents claimed IS and received a small extra income below maximum income disregard 1 person claimed IS and received help from other members of the family in work 1 couple on IS received small, occasional undeclared cash income	3 people in full-time employment 1 person lived with a partner in full-time employment
Total number = 7	Total number = 5	Total number = 4

The accounts of respondents themselves contained frequent references to their experience of material deprivation. All but one of those interviewed said they had experienced periods of financial insecurity and material shortage in their lives, if not at the present time, then in the past. Over half reported a lack of income to meet basic needs (such as adequate food and clothing, heating costs, unforeseen expenditure caused by illness, hospital trips and other emergencies, the provision of birthday and Christmas presents for the children). Few had savings or any sources of money that they could fall back on. Many used second-hand shops, mail order companies and hire purchase agreements as the primary means of buying clothes and household goods.

What was less easy to discern was how these conditions of material deprivation affected other areas of their lives - their social relationships, their aspirations and their self-esteem and confidence. It was clear that respondents acknowledged their lack of resources and low living standards in comparison to other people. They also recognised the limited opportunities for social participation that this afforded them. For example:

Do you find you're struggling to make ends meet or having to go without things that you need?

Not really, I mean the only thing that I do hate is like if I was sitting at the weekend and like, one of my sons comes in and says oh there's so and so and so and so going swimming, can I go swimming, then obviously I've got to say no, I've not got the money.

So it's the lack of other little treats and extras get you down?

Oh it can. I mean I sit, as I say, on a Saturday and Sunday and I mean what... when I leave here on a Friday, that is me inside till Monday morning. And I mean I would like at the weekends to sort of think, god, this week I've got £15, right, come on kids we'll go to the pictures and... (Kate)

How do you manage, living on that level of income?

Its really quite hard like the kids are saying, well my daughter now, the one that's 13, she's wanting all the good things and just explaining that I cannae afford £70 trainers, just cause so and so's... so that puts a lot of pressure on you for a start, that all the other kids have got this, that and the next thing. You try to make your kid the same, but you just cannae afford it, so wait till all the sales are on. (Paula)

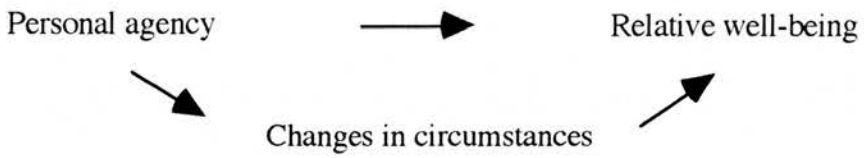
Both of these respondents described how financial and material hardship deprived them of the ability to enjoy the kinds of living standards that other people perhaps took for granted. In this respect, their accounts of what it was like to endure material deprivation corresponded to the findings of other qualitative studies of poverty. However, despite this sense of being excluded from the living standards and life-styles enjoyed by others there was little evidence to suggest that this gave rise to a sense of hopelessness, impotence or envy. The condition of financial difficulty and material shortage did not appear to translate into a negative sense of well-being as the defining feature of respondents' experience of poverty, in the way that I had expected.

Consequently, I began to realise that my own assumptions and ideas about the experience of poverty were out of step with the way in which respondents experienced and described their lives. My own framework for understanding the experience of poverty assumed that poverty was something that happened to people as a result of particular circumstances and events and that it was experienced as a relative loss of well-being. Thus the study was designed around the idea that subjects

would be able to describe the negative impact of poverty on their well-being and tell me about the ways in which they coped with, made sense of and responded to these conditions. I had implicitly assumed a direct correspondence between material circumstances and personal well-being; yet this seemed none too clear in the accounts of respondents.

The experience of poverty: Personal agency and control

In respondents' accounts, a quite different set of relationships between circumstances, resources and well-being was articulated. According to this view, their circumstances were not fixed for them by external events and conditions outside of their control. Instead, they believed that they were able to change and improve their situation through their own determination, skills and hard work. Furthermore, their welfare was not simply determined by the nature of their social and material circumstances at any particular time. Many of those interviewed regarded their well-being as the product of their own efforts, actions and decisions. Their accounts were dominated by an actor-oriented perspective which emphasised their personal agency.



When asked about their lack of material resources and the difficulties they experienced as a result, respondents frequently stressed the importance of human agency over and above the particular circumstances and constraints that they endured. Their self-presentations emphasised their own actions to increase their well-being. Even when apparently constrained by a lack of resources and poor living standards, a strong sense of control was apparent and a pride in being able to manage their resources effectively. One aspect of this concerned their financial control and budgeting skills. Robert, for example, had been unemployed for a number of years. He stressed how he and his wife had acquired the skills of managing and budgeting on a low income, through careful planning, borrowing and saving.

We always put money aside. I mean... we've always got new coats and that for the bairns, you know. The bairns... the bairns are never short, you know... toys and...

So it's your wife who sorts out the money?

Yeah, she sorts it out, yeah. And she likes to... she'll start...

She takes charge of the money that comes in from the social, I mean takes responsibility for the food and...

She handles all the money. Yeah she knows exactly what's to pay and all the rest of it, you know. [...] Like she started getting the presents months ago.[...] When you think about doing it that way it's... it works out a lot better, instead of having to pay one big lump sum near Christmas. The bairns always have a wee Christmas, we always make sure of that. (Robert)

According to respondents, variations in well-being were the product of personal agency and other personal qualities. Material shortage did not inevitably result in a condition of financial stress, hopelessness and inactivity. More important was an individual's self-belief, strength of character and resilience. Lynne, for example, recalled her struggle to repay debts left by her husband.

I was so determined that I'd get out of that and I definitely got out of that caper. Some people just cannae see a way out, but I just paid it ... we just got out.

So you managed to pay it off in the end?

Yeah. We just lived and we did without. I mean we lived on things like potatoes and eggs and soup and bread, anything, you know like stuff to fill them up, but that was good for them and the rest of the money apart from that...

And that was while you were married, you say?

Yeah, I got no help from him. (Lynne)

There is an underlying moral basis to these assertions of personal agency in relation to their circumstances and well-being. Respondents often admitted facing problems in the past. Drinking problems, nervous breakdown, stress and depression all surfaced in respondents' accounts and were usually connected to particular occurrences such as loss of work or relationship breakdown. In describing these experiences, respondents focused on their personal determination and strength of character in overcoming these problems and set-backs. They constructed 'morality tales' which testified to their personal competence and moral virtue.

I just think really it's down to the way you have been brought up yourself. Cause I mean okay with me, when my husband and I first split up I'd sit in the house, you know, on my own once the kids were in bed and start thinking I've gotta have a wee drink. So I had a wee drink, then it was two wee drinks the next day and I thought this is getting to be a habit. You're going to end up an alcoholic if you don't stop this. So I stopped... and started getting involved in things again. I made myself do that. But then other people I suppose, if they're not strong like that, just end up just keeping on drinking, okay, because they're so depressed. But I think it's just the different generations... of how people have been brought up (Ann).

In all of these cases, respondents stressed that the impact of particular circumstances on their well-being was mediated by their personal agency. Some respondents also emphasised that individuals could, through their own efforts and determination, overcome the constraints that they faced and increase their well-being. The theme of self-improvement was particularly strong in the accounts of those who worked or believed that they had raised their standard of living in comparison to other people living in the area. In their own lives, they described their efforts to raise their social and material circumstances and to distinguish themselves from those less well-off.

That's why my standard is better, because of my bairn but also because the way we live is a lot different from other people. Like er... we get called snobs. At the end of our street we get called snobs. Like... you've been to a meeting and you want to discuss something with somebody you say come back to the hoose and get a coffee and that. They come back to the hoose and I get the coffee beans oot and I get the coffee grinder oot and they sit and look at me. Naebody buys coffee beans. (Alex)

Well I suppose a lot of the people down here get so used to it, it's like on a treadmill, I mean you do get used to it. But I couldnae get used to it. I couldnae get used to being the way I was. I just wanted to be so different. [...] I mean that, the one thing that's really kept me going is the fact that I wanted to be better than what my family were. I wanted to have more than what my family had and pay for it in cash rather than going on the never-never, so they call it, the HP. I wanted to pay for it in cash. I mean I think that's what's really kept me going, why I just really wanted to be so different from the way I was brought up. Because, I had... I mean I didnae have a really rotten life... I mean it wasnae really bad... I mean, there was good points and bad points, but I mean when I look back on when I stayed with my family, up until I was seventeen and a half, I could say to myself, well I dinnae want to live like that no more, I've had enough of that, I

> want better things...for me, for my boyfriend and for my son. So I think that... that's been the main reason for me getting to where I've got to. [...] I mean, I know that I could do better... I could still do better, but at least... I've come up a few steps up the ladder, sort of thing. (Alice)

These respondents presented themselves as actively engaged in plans and strategies to improve their circumstances and enhance their welfare. Ruth, for example, was unemployed and lived alone and her lack of material resources and low standard of living were clearly evident. But her account was no grim tale of daily misery and hopelessness. Instead, she expressed a strong sense of personal control over her circumstances which included plans to improve her life, initially through forms of voluntary work and more recently through starting a course at a local college.

> I'm doing business administration. [...] It was actually a plan to change my whole life-style. Because I worked in pubs all my life and I fell and cracked my spine and I broke 3 vertebrates in my back. Well I was unemployed for 6 months then I saw this thing for community business training in the paper, so I applied for it... and I got it. The point is I had never actually sat... it's all keyboard work... and I had never before in my life sat before a keyboard... I didn't know how to work a typewriter or anything. So I mean... I've changed my whole outlook on life, you could almost say. (Ruth)

Even where respondents felt unable to change their existing circumstances, they did not see these as a permanent state of affairs but tended to look to the prospect of future change. Fiona, a single-parent, expressed confidence in her ability to achieve better things in the future, even if her goals and plans were presently constrained by her family and household circumstances.

> *In 5 years time, for example, what do you hope to be doing?*
> I'll be working with bairns [laughs]. Working, aye and I'll have money that I can go out and spend... I'd have my house the way I wanted it and my bairn could have everything she wanted. (Fiona)

The view expressed here strongly contrasts with the idea of people passively experiencing their circumstances and responding to the future with a sense of hopelessness or despair. I had expected people's accounts to be full of gloomy details of the hardship and poverty that they experienced and its negative impact on their well-being. But it was a belief in their ability to cope, to stay on top of things,

and retain their determination and optimism that was most evident. Respondents presented themselves as actors and agents who affected their circumstances and were responsible for their own well-being and not simply as passive victims trapped in circumstances over which they had no control. In their view, a sense of well-being was acquired through taking action to improve their circumstances (e.g. finding work, learning how to budget and save carefully, etc.) or through taking control of their lives and adopting a positive outlook towards the future.

In some cases, respondents clearly felt frustrated by the constraints of their circumstances and referred to the negative effects on their well-being of a lack of resources - the stress and strain of just surviving and making ends meet. And yet they continued to insist on their scope for positively affecting their well-being. Mary, for example, claimed that she could still make herself happy and stay on top of things:

> Aye, see we're living fae day tae day, or week tae week, week tae week we're living if ye ken what I mean, where's the next penny goin' tae go. Like the now, it's just a case you go out, ye get your messages right, ye pay your machine and the catalogue, get ye baccy and that's you, you ken that's all you're goin' tae get each week, nothing else. [...] That's what it's like. But I mean we can make ourselves happy enough, ken as long as we've got each other and there's grub there alright. But, dunnie get me wrong, I'd love to just go out and buy myself something new to wear or her something new to wear or, ken... and just one pair of curtains isn't helping either. I'm trying to get them dry and back up, ironing them dry, things like that. [...] Folk'll be thinking she's only got one pair of curtains but at least she washes them. It's funny in a way but it's not in another. [...] But I mean nothing else... quite happy. I think cause ye dunnie expect tae have all that, you get used to it, ken what I mean, ye dinnie look forward to it any more, except for your giro...[laughs] (Mary)

The sense of being in control of their lives, rather than feeling overwhelmed or rendered helpless by a lack of resources, appeared vital to the self-conceptions of respondents. Even where their scope for improving their well-being and changing their circumstances appeared limited, they describe themselves as actively engaged in managing and dealing with the circumstances of their everyday lives.

I manage... I mean you just do. As long as they've got warm clothes on their backs and proper food in their stomach, that's the 2 main items that I go for, that's the thing that [inaudible] and their love. We don't go out, I mean we hardly go out.

Then... or now also?

Then and now, we still can't manage it and... you know if I get a little more here... but that goes on things like shoes, trainers... my son goes through a pair a month just about.

What about Christmas, how's that usually?

I can't last it, that's a big hassle. Well from this month, this October month, I don't spend any of my wages... I really have to go into dire straits, cut back on the phone bill and everything to see that... you know for the Christmas bit. (Lynne)

Although the constraints and difficulties that she encounters are all too apparent, the emphasis in her account is firmly on her own actions and strategies in coping with her lack of material resources. It is only in her final comment, below, that she openly expresses frustration with the nature of her circumstances in a way that conveys the negative impact on her sense of well-being:

You know like I don't want to live like this but we've got no choice... we have to save for anything... everything. (Lynne)

It was common to find that even where respondents alluded to the difficulties that they faced, they retained a strong sense of their ability to overcome these external constraints rather than allowing them to have a determining effect on their personal well-being. For the latter implied personal weakness and failure, an inability to cope with and overcome adversity and a sense of being defeated and rendered helpless by circumstances. The maintenance of their self-respect and dignity seemed to depend on preserving a sense of their own strength of character, resilience, personal control and agency. In this respect, a common feature of respondents' accounts was the tendency to compare their own agency and well-being with the passive submission and acquiescence they perceived in others. While their own self-presentations showed themselves as fighters and copers, it was implied that others lacked agency and the ability to cope with or exert any control over their circumstances.

See I'm not one for just sitting about the house, I cannae, even if [inaudible] I will not sit and let that get me down because if I did, the two of us would be an [inaudible] because he sits and lets everything get him down. Ken I'm the fighter in the house, if you ken what I mean, he's not. He used... he's trying, dunnie get me wrong, he's trying but he's

not gettin' anywhere, ken that way. I mean he's like oh just stick me in a wheelchair, away ye go, ye dunnie have to put up with this and stuff like that. (Mary)

Respondents distinguished themselves from other people not in terms of their financial and material circumstances, but by reference to their skills in managing on a low income, their ability to retain a sense of personal control and worth and their refusal to be ground down by the stresses and strains that they faced. The avoidance of debt was regarded as an important sign of one's personal competence and coping ability. Unmanageable debt implied a loss of personal control and the suggestion of being unable to cope with and overwhelmed by one's lack of resources. Kate saw her own attempts to overcome debt in terms of a conscious reassertion of personal control over her circumstances.

I mean I ken a lot of people that are up to their eyes in debt, just to keep up. I mean I used to be like that and then I just totally thought what's the point. Ken like you were getting your money on a Monday and 90% of it was having to get paid out on catalogues or things like that. [...] So I really feel the last 9 months that's when I've, so to speak, got the finger out and got on with it.

How?

Just, I suppose I started to decide what I wanted and...as I say, it's just about the last 9 months I've started sort of thinking right, I'm gonna do this and I'm gonna do that. I mean as I say like I was struggling to get out of debt and as I say it was yesterday I finished the Provy, the week before, the money I'd borrowed from here I managed to give back. And as I say, when January comes that'll be something else out the road. Whereas before, I'd think och, why pay them sort of £4 a week and finish it then...I might as well give em a pound a week and let it drag on. Whereas like now. (Kate)

Among those who admitted to financial shortage and a lack of material welfare, there was a strong tendency to claim special merit on the basis of their personal attitude and behaviour in dealing with their situation. Once again, they contrasted their own moral worthiness and positive sense of coping with the attitude of other people who gave up or did not try sufficiently hard. Thus Robert, who had been out of work for some years, stressed his continued perseverance and motivation in looking for work. In his view, it was the failure to remain active and motivated in the search for work rather than the lack of work itself, that resulted in a loss of self-esteem and respect.

I mean a lot of them prefer to be on the dole. You just... as I say, you've just got to believe and hunt about... even now, you're better going out to the actual places yourself, ken, rather than wait for the dole to find you... you're best getting out there and looking yourself.

So you'd got into a kind of rut, before that?

Yeah, yeah, I just said, och something'll work Friday, ken. You do get like that. Then you've just got to say to yourself, you've got to get up and do something... ken you've just got you to do it. (Robert)

All of the respondents attempted to maintain a view of their lives which emphasised their personal competence and control over their circumstances. It was this determination to maintain a sense of their dignity, self-belief, personal worth and ability that seemed to lie at the heart of their accounts. Feelings of self-doubt and resignation were sometimes expressed by respondents in discussing the constraints and frustrations that they faced in their present circumstances. But by comparing their own attitudes and actions with other people they regarded as weak or passive, they sought to distance themselves from their self-doubts by asserting their moral worthiness in comparison to others. This was most evident among respondents whose own situations were heavily constrained. Among these individuals there was a concern to be identified as competent individuals and not simply categorised on the basis of their social position and material circumstances in ways which denied their personal identity and agency.

I mean I now start thinking it's me that I've got to think of... and if not I would just be like an awful lot of them in the area... they're just a mum and they're a mum until the day they die because they're just totally... heir life revolves around their kids all the time, they cannae do nothing because their kids are there. (Kate)

The 'other people' with whom respondents commonly compared themselves were often not real individuals, but anonymous others who served to embody their own fears and doubts. They were characterised as trapped and defeated by their circumstances, without personal agency or motivation and lacking respect or worth in the eyes of other people. For respondents, their self-respect and dignity depended on maintaining a strong sense of their agency and resilience in the face of difficulties which dragged other people down. However, the constant necessity of proving their moral fortitude and presenting a positive outlook was a source of tension in their

lives. This was painfully clear as respondents spoke of how unforeseen events and adverse occurrences had frustrated their hopes and plans.

> *So do you feel a lot of stress?*
>
> Oh aye, here you are, look at me now... I'm really stressed up today, I think because like, one, Alan's in the hospital, two, last week was different fae this week, cause last week I was goin' tae do my creche work, I was goin' tae start the pantomime, ken stuff like that, look for a job. Now I cannae, all that's back-fired cause Alan's in hospital. Plus I'm like oh no, it's goin' tae be one fifty a day bus fare, time I get his juice and his biscuits... I mean dunnie get me wrong, when he was in hospital last month I was just goin' to end it like, divorce and everything because I couldnae handle it any mair. And I thought no, I'm not letting that get on top of me ken. But then again now I'm thinking, God he's in again och I cannae be doin' with all this, ken what I mean. Its really hard for me like thinking I've got this for the rest of my life in and out of hospital and everything. But as he says, it's not his fault... but that's the way it goes, I suppose. So, I couldnae like just go, I'm goin' to look for a job, which I was before he got taken into hospital there. When he got out of hospital a month ago, I started looking for a job along the [inaudible] and stuff, started the creche training and all that, but that's him back in, so... it's knackered things up. And it kind of keeps putting me off, putting me back. I keep losing confidence every time he goes back into hospital, I keep losing confidence to go and look for a job all over again, ken what I mean, cause I'm not sure what's going to happen next. And now that... like I dinnie ken he was goin' tae be in hospital all his life when I met him obviously, but now that he is, I'm kind of going off the idea, now that I know, if you ken what I mean, it's kind of hard, ye cannae just sort of kick him when he's down, can you? I'm not sure if I want tae do it or no' now. I had all this ambition like I'm goin' tae start the creche work and do my drama... and it all gets knackered. (Mary)

The dominance of an 'actor-oriented' perspective among respondents, which placed emphasis on their role as social agents and actors, appears in conflict with more conventional approaches to poverty which focus on the subjection of people to constraining forces. The latter, as I suggested in chapter 2, promote a rather passive and one-dimensional understanding of poor people. Ironically, it was in terms of these images and stereotypes that respondents described the circumstances of other people they regarded as less well-off than themselves. While their own accounts of material shortage and deprivation emphasised their continued scope for agency, their accounts of other people in similar circumstances to their own highlighted their passivity and inability to cope.

Respondents' own self-presentations rarely gave any indication of being subjected to forces that weakened their sense of personal control and responsibility for their welfare and their determination to improve their lives through their own actions. In describing their own lives, they challenged the notion that their personal well-being, identity and subjective experience were simply determined by the nature of their circumstances. The assertion of agency took on a particular significance in their lives which was bound up with the need to maintain a positive self-image and preserve their own dignity and self-respect in circumstances which called these into question. To understand this, we must first consider the particular conceptions of poverty and poor people held by respondents.

Subjective expressions of poverty

In the course of the interviews, respondents were asked to assess their own living standards and material well-being over time. They were asked to comment on their ability to manage on the money they received, to meet the needs of their families and generally to make ends meet. A rudimentary classification representing different levels of relative material well-being was constructed. Respondents were then divided into four groups on the basis of their assessments of their living conditions and financial circumstances and their relative well-being and ability to manage.

Better-off than many	Presently coping, but insecure	Make do by cutting back	Struggling to make ends meet
Eddie (employed, two parent family)	Alice (two parent family, partner employed)	Robert (two parent family, both unemployed)	Mary (two parent family, both unemployed)
Ann (employed, single parent family)	Phyllis (two parent family, employed part-time)	Ruth (unemployed, lives alone)	Kate (unemployed, single parent family)
Julie (two parent family, both employed)	Jackie (unemployed, but children are employed)	Maureen (unemployed, lives alone)	Paula (occasionally employed, single parent family)
	Alex (two parent family, unemployed but takes occasional casual employment)	Fiona (unemployed, single parent family)	Lynne (employed part-time, single parent family)
		Pam (unemployed, lives alone)	

Respondents were asked during the interviews whether they considered themselves poor at the present time. They were also asked whether they regarded themselves as poor during any periods of hardship or financial difficulty that they described in the past. The findings are presented below, starting with those respondents whose assessment of their material well-being was lowest.

1. Struggling to make ends meet

Four people reported that they experienced a shortage of resources and difficulty in making ends meet. They found themselves constantly juggling their money to meet their needs and experienced difficulty paying their bills. They also felt vulnerable to unexpected events and adverse occurrences that placed a sudden demand on their income. It was expected that people in this group would be the most likely to consider themselves poor. In fact, only Kate did so. The others all claimed that they were not poor and had never experienced poverty. This was in spite of the fact that both Lynne and Paula recounted stories of extreme hardship in the past.

2. Make do by cutting back

Five people reported that they experienced a low standard of living and only managed by cutting back on consumption and sacrificing spending on social activities. They generally found their income insufficient to afford treats or new clothes for their children and relied on mail order catalogues, second-hand shops and help from friends and family to meet many of their needs. Fiona was the only person in this group who identified herself as poor. However, she qualified her use of the term, explaining that she considered herself poor only in one particular sense of the word. Robert, Ruth and Maureen all said they were not poor often comparing their own situation favourably with others whom they regarded as poor because they were less able to cope. Pam said she was not poor and claimed that local people generally were not in poverty.

3. Managing to get by on a low income.

The four people in this group all felt that their material welfare had generally improved after a series of ups and downs in their lives. They acknowledged that in the past, they had experienced difficulties, but now felt they were on top of things and perhaps better off than many other people in the area. Nobody in this group regarded themselves as poor. However, two people, Phyllis and Jackie, referred to

periods of hardship that they had experienced in the past which they described as poverty.

4. Better-off than many.

Three people reported that they had never really experienced financial difficulties or material shortages. All were presently working. They did not feel they were significantly better off than other people in the area, but recognised that their circumstances afforded them greater security, scope for choice and freedom from hardship. All three had experienced spells of unemployment in the past, but despite a drop in living standards during these times, they felt they had managed to get by and not suffered great material deprivation. It was not surprising to find that people in this group did not regard themselves as poor.

These findings suggested a clear divergence between subjective and objective definitions of poverty. Subjective expressions of poverty did not automatically follow personal accounts of financial difficulty, material shortage and poor living standards. In general, respondents did not think of themselves as poor even when they described periods of material hardship, unemployment, financial struggle and so on. In fact, only two people among the total number of sixteen interviewed regarded themselves as poor when asked. In addition, two people said they had experienced poverty in the past although they were not currently poor. The remaining twelve indicated that they did not consider themselves poor at the present time or in the past.

It is clearly not possible, on the basis of the small number of people interviewed, to make strong claims about the correlation between material well-being and the subjective experience of poverty. Clearly further research is required which would employ a larger sample frame. It is possible to say that the two respondents who identified themselves as poor were among those who reported a low standard of living and a relative lack of material well-being. But it was also evident that many of those who admitted difficulty in managing or referred to periods of hardship in their lives, did not see themselves as poor. There were plainly other factors involved in those cases where people's subjective perceptions of their lives appeared to contradict their accounts of their objective circumstances.

Respondents' conceptions of poverty

Respondents' statements on poverty were often ambiguous and clearly needed to be interpreted with care, paying close attention to the comments and explanations that they provided. In this section I analyse the reasons that they gave for holding a particular view of themselves as poor or not, including their choice of reference groups, the criteria and standards that they employed and their perception of their own lives. My aim was to find out whether they held a particular conception of poverty and the criteria that they used for distinguishing experiences as poor. I look at what their comments revealed about their understanding of the terms poverty and poor in relation to their own lives and those of other people. I also consider which particular individuals and groups they referred to as poor and what particular aspects of their situation they pinpointed when using the term.

It was significant that in a number of cases respondents provided inconsistent or evasive replies when asked if they were poor. They frequently pointed to other people or conditions they regarded as poor as if suggesting that they themselves were not in the same situation. However, respondents sometimes made remarks which were unprompted and appeared to contradict earlier denials of poverty by indicating that in some ways they did regard themselves as poor. This implied that respondents were aware of a variety of meanings of poverty and employed the term in different ways in different contexts. By examining the ambiguities and contradictions in their statements on poverty, I hoped to understand the complex sets of meanings associated with the word. Take the following extract, for example:

> *I wanted to ask you your opinion about issues like poverty, for example how you'd define poverty and which people in what situation you'd regard as poor?*
>
> Somebody on the social... [laughs] I mean, I'm poor, but I can live with it.
>
> *So on the one hand you're saying you can manage, but on the other...*
>
> If they gave me a £20 rise I'd be grateful for it.
>
> *So you would say that you are poor on the basis of your income and because of being on the social, even though you can manage on that income?*
>
> Aye, I'm poor. I can manage it but if they gave me mair, I'd even love it, ken what I mean. You've just got to live with what you've got... what you've got, you've got to live with and that's it... there's nothing you can do about it.
>
> *So let me get this right. You're saying that you're poor in that you live on the social, but...*

> Oh aye, I'm poor. But I dunnae feel poor... cause I can live with it. I think it's most folk that cannae manage, and seem to find it really hard... but I don't find it hard at all. (Fiona)

This respondent makes a subtle distinction between being poor and feeling poor. She is poor because, as a single-parent on Income Support, she has no immediate chance of improving her income and is denied the kind of lifestyle and living conditions open to those in employment. She therefore regards her circumstances as poor. However, she adds that she does not 'feel poor'. Why? Because she does not personally find it such a struggle to manage, as she imagines other people facing similar material circumstances do. Her comment, 'I can live with it', could perhaps be interpreted as meaning that she simply endures her conditions. But taken alongside her other comments, it appears more likely to indicate that she feels herself in control and on top of things, despite the difficulties that she faces. It is on this basis that she differentiates herself from those she sees as poor.

In considering the issue of poverty as a question relating to her own personal experience, she therefore understands the term in two different ways - one which refers to her circumstances and relative living standards, the other which points to a conception of poor people as much worse-off than herself. This ambiguity was apparent in the comments of other respondents. On the one hand, they were keen to deny that they were poor and on the other, they made comments which implied that in some ways they did regard themselves as poor. When pressed, they frequently qualified their use of the term, indicating that they were poor only in some limited sense of the word, while distancing themselves from other meanings of the term. Paula, for example, replied to the question as follows:

> Sometimes it's really quite hard because I find like with what I get just now, like you're buying the cheapest of mince and the time you brown it, half is grease. That's the only time I say I'm... I don't say I'm poor, poor... well I smoke for a start so if I didnae smoke I maybe could afford to eat a bit better but... erm, like when folk say well I had this for our Sunday dinner, this huge big joint, well we dunnie have that, so I'm not... but we don't do without, we have a substantial meal every night that fills you up, but it's not really as good quality as somebody that's got 2 parents out working, that can afford... (Paula)

We see her wrestling with the concept of poverty apparently wanting to convey her sense of dissatisfaction with her present circumstances and her inability to attain a better of standard of living, but at the same time, not wanting to be seen as poor. She begins by referring to one aspect of her condition that for her signifies poverty - she cannot afford better quality food for her family. However, she backs away from identifying herself as poor by commenting that if she can afford to smoke, she cannot be really poor. She assures the interviewer that her children do not go without, as if dissociating herself from a notion of poverty which identifies poor people by their failure to provide for their family. Finally, she refers again to the gap between her own low living standards and those of other groups who are better off than her because they are employed.

Like Fiona, she is ambiguous on the subject of poverty. When asked directly whether or not she is poor, she says no, because she does not believe that her material conditions are so bad as to warrant the description. However she does feel poor in the sense that her circumstances deny her the kind of living standards enjoyed by others. At the same time, she appears keen to dissociate herself from a view of poor people as demoralised, incapable of managing and lacking the resources to help themselves. The ambiguities and contradictions in her statements on poverty only make sense when it is recognised that the meaning of poverty understood by Fiona and Paula is not based simply on a person's relative material well-being. In their understanding of what it means to be poor, a more subtle and sophisticated set of distinctions are employed.

Close examination of respondents' accounts revealed two fundamentally different ways of understanding poverty in relation to people's personal circumstances and experiences (rather than as a general social problem and public issue). On the one hand, it was used to refer to particular circumstances in which people were worse-off than other people and constrained in their use of and access to resources. In this sense, poverty was interpreted as a condition of relative deprivation and inadequate resources. The second meaning of the term referred to an extreme level of hardship indicating an inability to cope and a lack of control over one's circumstances. Used in this way, poor people were set apart from the rest of society in terms of a particular social identity and position. I look at these two conceptions in more detail below.

Poverty defined as circumstances of relative deprivation

When respondents defined poverty in terms of material and social conditions, it was essentially a relative definition that they employed. It was based on a comparison of their own circumstances with those of some other reference group. Those identified as poor had a lower standard of living because their access to resources of various kinds was impaired by the constraints of the situations in which they found themselves. These situations were linked to particular financial circumstances (e.g. insufficient income to meet their needs), household and family situations (e.g. as single parents, single householders or families with children) or employment status (e.g. in low paid work or unemployed). The experience of poverty was therefore associated with particular social and material circumstances which resulted in poor living standards, restricted opportunities and constraints on agency.

Respondents who described their own situation as poor invariably used the word to convey a sense of indignation about that fact that they were unable to attain a standard of living considered normal on account of their particular circumstances. Kate and Fiona were both single-parents and saw themselves as poor because they were effectively excluded from employment and reliant on state benefits as a result of their family circumstances. Fiona claimed that as a single-parent mother she had no choice but to remain on benefits in order to bring up her child, because of the lack of affordable child care. This inevitably meant she endured a low standard of living compared to those in employment. Nevertheless, she continually stressed the fact that although she was poor, she could manage on her income:

> *So what does it mean to be poor?*
>
> Nae money. Well I've nae money, ken, it's like I dunnie think... I dunnie see myself as poor. Oh if I cannae go out and buy anything I wanted, that's being poor really... going out and saying I can buy this and buy that, I've got the money here... like if they're working... if I was working I'd be able to go out and say, oh I can go and get this, I can go out and get that. On the social you're stuck that way, you've either got to save for it or...
>
> *So you would consider yourself poor for as long as you were living on the social?*
>
> Oh aye, definitely.
>
> *And if you were to get this job at the Childcare Centre, that would change things completely?*

Aye, it'd mean I'd have more money, wages that I could say, right, go out and get this, go out and get that. I could buy all the time. Cause as I look at it if I can live off what I get the now on the social, 60, no £70 a week. If I can live off of that the now, there's no doubt if I was working, even paying rent... if the bills werenae gonna change, I'd be rolling in money. But then I'd be able to go out and buy mair things for my house and that, buy fresh meat all the time instead of frozen stuff. (Fiona)

Kate also saw herself as poor. As a single mother with four children she was unable to work. But her reliance on state benefits meant that she was unable to afford a decent standard of living.

What about yourself. Would you ever say that you yourself were poor in some sense, or that you are now?

Uh hum.

So, has this been a fairly long-term, continuous situation for you?

Oh aye. I would love to do some work, I really would. But because of the position I'm in, there's just no way. I mean like with what I'm getting on the social security... I mean if I was going out to work, I would need to make sure that I had that amount, then you're talking about... I'd need to pay for school dinners, I'd need to pay for prescriptions, I'd need to pay my way, I'd need to pay bus fares, I would need to pay a baby-sitter... there is no way.

How would you then, define being in poverty? How would you describe what it means to be poor?

Again, not having the money to, as I say, add wee trips on, add we treats on. I mean, even me, I mean I go out once in a blue moon because I cannae... I mean I get my baby-sitters... I mean I get my baby-sitters from the sitters service and now nearly every time my turn comes, I just go and visit somebody because I cannae afford to go out... I mean just like me as well, I'd love to go and get my hair cut, erm, but I cannae. It's just wee things like that. (Kate)

Both of these women clearly located the cause of their poverty in their particular circumstances. They were poor due to inadequate systems of social welfare provision for single mothers in their situation and the limited opportunities to enter the labour market. They contrasted their position at the present time with that of other people in work and with earlier periods of their lives, before having children, when they themselves were employed. They did not see poverty as the result of their own personal failing, inadequacy or mismanagement of resources. Their accounts

implicitly took issue with the popular belief that single mothers were irresponsible or partly to blame for their circumstances.

Another two respondents stated that although they were not presently poor, they had experienced periods of poverty in the past. Again, they referred to particular circumstances and conditions which had reduced their control over their lives to a significant degree. Phyllis, for example, recalled a period early on in her marriage when her husband was made redundant and she was out of work. It was the sudden drop in income, the difficulties in making ends meet and the sense of shame and uncertainty she felt that contributed to her perception that she was poor at the time. Jackie, a single parent, described a period of several weeks during which the payment of Income Support was suspended. Attempting to survive and support herself and her teenage children on little more than £20 a week she found it impossible to avoid running up debts and borrowed heavily from friends and family in an effort to make ends meet.

> That was... I really think that was the worst time in my life. And when you've nae money you dunnie feel like doing anything... you cannae do anything. But you've just got to... I mean you're feared to clean the house in case you use too much washing up liquid or soap powder or... do you know what I mean... or electricity.
>
> *Apart from on that occasion, would you consider yourself to be poor as such?*
>
> I mean, I would love to be better off. But as long as I've got enough food in the house or just money for to do me... I mean, if we don't have to panic if the bairn needs a pair of shoes I think I'm quite well off, ken what I mean.
>
> *So if you feel you can manage to get the basics...*
>
> If I can manage on a week to week basis, I'm quite happy about that. I mean I would like holidays abroad and all the rest of it but I always find something else to spend the money on, you know. (Jackie)

For Jackie and Phyllis, their perception of being poor in the past related to their material circumstances at the time. They did not regard themselves as poor outside of these times. 'Nothing could have been like what it had been for that 4 months', says Jackie, citing this as one of several occasions on which she was poor. These episodes of poverty were regarded as exceptional and untypical - the result of unforeseen events and adverse occurrences that lay outside of their control. Poverty was understood as a period of relative hardship and financial insecurity due to a temporary lack of resources. It was not a result of their own actions, financial

imprudence or lack of coping skills. Nor was it unique to them as individuals. It could happen to anyone regardless of their personal character.

In this sense, poverty was viewed in terms of the disparity between their own resources and living standards at a particular point in time and those they regarded as normal or common among other people or indeed, in their own lives. Subjective definitions of poverty depended on the point of reference that was chosen. Fiona and Kate compared themselves with other people in employment. For Jackie and Phyllis, the point of contrast was not other people's living conditions, but what they regarded as normal in their own lives. Phyllis felt that people living in the area were made poor through having to endure conditions and constraints which lessened the quality of their lives, such as poor housing, education and employment prospects. Another respondent, Julie, stated that although she did not regard herself as poor, she felt that local people were poor, when she compared their living conditions and life-styles with those of people living outside of the area.

> *Finally, I've been asking people about poverty, what the word means to them, how they'd define it, whether they've experienced or been affected by it and so on.*
> Well I think... I think I wouldnae say I was poor myself, but the place is poverty-stricken...
> *Here?*
> Aye, aye... I would because... with living on the border between here and Bracknell [neighbouring area], it so happens that my medical practice is in Bracknell... and when I go to the doctors there it's a totally different world up there... to coming here and it's a totally different world going to... to get the messages at Bracknell. to what it is here. People eat different there and just sort of walking round Safeways you see what people buy... ken, their wholemeal bread and everything like that and the people here dunnie ken what wholemeal bread tasted like, ken... cause the white bread's cheaper and... just all these things... I dunno, I didnae just mean that I ken, but... if you chose, you wouldnae live in a damp house or... ken. (Julie)

Alice, who like Julie, considered herself better-off than most other people in the area, saw local people's lives as poor, when she considered their financial and employment circumstances. Once again, it is clear that she is making a relative judgement with her point of reference being the life-styles and living conditions associated with those living in better-off neighbourhoods.

Would you consider that many of the people here are poor, in some sense?

Erm, I'd say that the majority of the people down here [...] are poorer than your everyday working-class person. I mean down here they're not really working-class, they're below working-class because they havenae got money, a real income coming in, except what they get from the DSS. So I suppose that they're really below working-class. (Alice)

It was observed that when respondents identified themselves as poor, it was by reference to their relative material and social conditions that they made this judgement. Their point of reference was usually employed people or periods of their lives in which they were better off. Poverty was not a product of their personal characteristics or capabilities and was not regarded as a permanent condition. It was their circumstances above all that defined them as poor. Respondents pointed to changes in their situation in the past and were optimistic about changing their circumstances in the future. Poverty entailed certain constraints on agency due to circumstances which lay outside of the individual's control and resulted in poor living standards and a greatly restricted life-style compared to other people. However, subjects saw their own actions as vital in helping them to adjust and accommodate themselves to life on a low income. Being poor did not identify the individual as a social type or place them in a particular social category. It could happen to anyone who found themselves in similar circumstances.

Respondents sometimes used the same criteria to argue that they were not poor. In this case, they pointed to their own relative material welfare by selecting as their point of reference individuals and groups whom they considered worse off than themselves. A number of respondents argued that they were not actually poor, despite the fact that they considered their own income insufficient to buy new clothes and furniture or to take part in social activities. Instead, they pointed to the financial difficulties and stains experienced by other people whose choices and options were far more constrained than their own. Maureen, who was unemployed and lived alone, endured meagre living standards, but commented that her own situation was far better than that of families with children to bring up.

I wanted to ask about the word poverty, like firstly, what being poor would mean, to you, and secondly, if you consider yourself to be poor or to have been poor in the past?

Well, I would say I was still in the same situation as what I was... but with one difference - I don't have to worry about feeding the kids. Just now I worry about making

sure I've got enough money to keep myself. [...] I wouldnae want to go back to those times again. Oh no, definitely not. I'm quite happy the way I am now... a lot happier now. Because I mean the money I get I know that I've got to keep myself on that, without worrying how I'm going to feed the kids, how am I going to afford them, you know. [...] But now... I mean there is a lot of parents who find it very hard to survive, more now because of the shop prices.

So you think things are getting worse?

I suppose I dunnie worry about myself so much, but I worry about what other people are sort of going through with this... with this sort of having to pay poll tax off their money... and then there's council tax getting taken off ... and that's going to be an awful lot for them to cope with, especially if they've got young kids. Then the water, if that ever comes about... You know I say to myself a lot of people are just going to crack. [...] Because the mother's going to her bed at night and saying my kids have not got a pair of shoes and so I cannae send them to school. They've not got a pair of decent shoes, so I'll have to keep them off. I mean I've known families like that, I've come across families like that recently... and I'm talking about very recently. (Maureen)

Ruth was in a similar position and admitted that she found it difficult to make her money last from week to week. However, she did not regard herself as poor because she believed that many people were less well off than herself. In particular, she described the hardship, financial stress and difficulties faced by her sister's family who were dependent on state benefits.

I mean I know people that are in poverty, like I was talking about my wee sister and that. I mean to me, that is poverty.

What exactly about her circumstances?

Well, overcrowding and... I mean her man's nae job, she's nae job, the bairns are all at the school...and there's 5 bairns sleeping in one bedroom. To me that's poverty. I mean she knows I'm unemployed but she still has to come doon here and borrow money off me if I've got it, you know, to cover her until her husband's giro comes. Or she'll come and say, erm...can you give me some bread or milk or whatever until I get some money to buy some for the bairns and things like that. I mean I know a few folk round here that are on that line. To me that's poverty. (Ruth)

No implication of blame or criticism was apparent in identifying these families as poor. Instead a strong degree of empathy was expressed. It was their circumstances, as unemployed families, struggling to bring up children on a level of income seen as

insufficient to meet their needs, that made them poor. Their financial circumstances were precarious, their scope for control was severely curtailed and they faced great difficulties in making ends meet. Poverty in these terms was a product of particular circumstances, rather than a matter of individual ability or character.

Finally, for some respondents who stated that they were not poor, it was clear that their material circumstances were better than those of many people in the area. In these cases, respondents' subjective assessments corresponded to the objective conditions that they experienced. There was no contradiction in their perception of themselves as financially secure compared to many others in the area who were unemployed or less well-off and experienced difficulty in making ends meet.

Poverty defined in terms of 'poor people' as a social category.

The second way in which poverty was commonly understood was in terms of a particular level of material hardship, denoted by the term 'poverty-stricken'. A significant finding was that respondents never referred to their own situation as poor in the sense of 'poverty-stricken', even when they reported experiencing forms of material shortage and deprivation. Nor did they employ poverty in this sense in describing people with whom they closely identified. Instead, this meaning of poverty was used only in referring to the circumstances of other people, where a degree of social distance was involved.

According to this perspective, poverty was perceived not as a relative lack of well-being, but as an absolute condition of deprivation and need. Poor living standards, forms of social deprivation or the experience of financial stress and insecurity were not in themselves sufficient grounds for identifying someone as poor. The fact that respondents experienced a lower standard of living than other people did not make them poor, even if they had to cut-back in order to get by. It was only when people lacked the 'essentials' that they were regarded as poor. Intrinsic to this notion of poverty was a belief in the existence of some level of need or deprivation that distinguished the poor from those who simply endured a low standard of living. Robert, for example, claimed that his family were not poor because they were able to secure the 'essentials', such as clothing and food, without running into debt.

What does poor mean to you then?

I would regard poor as the kids never had any shoes or anything like that, you know. Not being able to get clothes for them and stuff. I'm not in work but I can still get clothes and stuff, you know. So that way, I don't think I'm poor, I mean I've not got much, but I'm not actually poor.

So you don't see yourself as poor?

No. I mean poor is somebody that's... their kids are around and [inaudible] see any shoes or anything like that.

So somebody without the basics, the essentials?

Yeah... things like that... washing machines and things like that... things that you do need.

But there are some people in the area that you would consider as poor?

Yeah, there is some people around about here that are poor, you know like, er... my second oldest son he's got a laddie, a pal, that comes to the door sometimes. I mean I just happened to look at him... looked at his feet for some reason and he had nae socks on, you know, and it was bitter cold outside and that... that's poor... if ye cannae put socks on your bairn, you know. I mean we dunnie... as I say my kids... we do our best with... trying to no' let them go withoot anything... you know but on the other hand, we're no' get ourselves into debt tae gie 'em these things, we'd rather save up for them... or whatever. (Robert)

In this extract he begins by contrasting his own position ('I can still get clothes and stuff, you know') with the situation of those he regards as poor, on account of their lack of material well-being ('the kids never had any shoes or anything like that'). Poor people were distinguished by their inability to meet the most basic needs. This was not deemed to be their fault. Rather, they were rendered poor by their inability to resist the flow of disadvantages and deprivations that overwhelmed them. Poverty in this sense referred to the depth of material hardship experienced, but only in the sense of indicating an inability to cope with that condition, which gave rise to feelings of hopelessness, impotence and shame. Referring to his own situation, Robert assures us that his children are well provided for and do not go without adequate meals, shoes and clothing. 'The poor', by contrast, are identified by certain visible signs that set them apart from other people and which relate to an inability to avoid the shame, stigma and degradation of poverty ('if ye cannae put socks on your bairn, you know').

In a similar way, Mary replied to the question of whether she was poor by providing assurances of her ability to manage:

> Well when she needs claes, you start worrying, cause like where you're goin' tae get them and stuff, goin' in the second-hand shops and there's not that much ken nice stuff, sort of modern stuff for bairns. I wouldnae put old-fashioned claes on her, ken, I wouldnae be that desperate. But I wouldnae say I was in a really desperate situation like, at least we've got food and clothes and a bath, that makes me quite happy, ken what I mean... I've got my telly, so... [laughs]. I suppose I'm the way now, if I've got my health and my man and bairn was alright and I've got food in the cupboard, I'm alright that way, that makes me happy enough, ken I dinnie expect nothing else.
> (Mary)

The use of terms like 'essentials' and 'desperate' appeared at first sight to suggest a definition of poverty in subsistence terms. On closer examination, there appeared little agreement or consensus among respondents about what actually constituted 'essentials'. For some it meant washing machines and decent shoes for the children, while others took a more stringent view, including only the basics of food and shelter. Overall, this suggested that poverty was actually defined in a relative sense and always in reference to other people rather than themselves. The importance of terms like 'essentials' and 'desperate' lay more in their symbolic value than in the specification of an actual level of material deprivation recognised as constituting poverty. In particular, the use of these terms appeared to establish a definite boundary between the poor and the non-poor which allowed respondents to distinguish their own lives from those they identified as 'poor'. Central to this conception of poverty was the idea that the poor had crossed some line which placed them in a social category or group set apart from the rest of the population. No longer able to function according to social norms, they acquired a particular social identity and subjectivity as poor people.

Respondents' use of the term 'poverty-stricken' conveyed the same sense of poverty as an extreme state at some remove from their own everyday experience of relative deprivation. In this way the experience of poverty was defined as a quite separate social condition faced by people who lacked all resources and capacity to help themselves. Thus Lynne, for example, perceived her life as an ongoing struggle against material shortage and financial difficulty. But she referred to these as 'hard times' rather than as experiences of poverty. She reserved the word 'poor' for those literally without the basics of food, shelter and health.

What do I think poverty is? [...] I don't think there's so many today, you know like now, that's poverty-stricken. I think you have a fight, an ongoing battle. But I think if you want to look at poverty, I think the older generation... they've seen more poverty. I think poverty to me is looking at Romania, that's poverty, that's doing without, that's hardship. I don't think... I think I've done without in my life and I've had a lot of hard times but I wouldn't say I was poverty-stricken.

So you'd look back and see 'hard times' rather than poverty?

Aye. (Lynne)

The defining feature of this conception of poverty was not the experience of a particular level of material hardship, but the assumption of functional incapacity. To be 'poverty-stricken' was to be struck down and rendered helpless, as if by illness. In this sense, it was clearly differentiated from a state of relative hardship. Alice, for example, drew on her own childhood experiences in describing her understanding of what it meant to be poor.

I suppose that everybody classes poverty different, I mean, like myself, I can stand back and say oh well, fair enough, there's been days where I've been really skint, there's no food in the cupboard and that, but then I'm better off than the people that are homeless. I mean so it's different, someone that's homeless would turn round to me and say oh you don't know what poverty-stricken is, you don't know what it's like to be without a roof over your head and so if I ask somebody else they'll take it differently.

So, it's all relative?

I mean, I've never been totally poverty-stricken. I mean I've always managed to get by... When we were a family, times were really hard. But since then we're... I mean, there's no way I would go a whole day without food anywhere, I'd always get it from somewhere, no matter what. So I've never been really poverty-stricken. (Alice)

Alice recognised that the term poverty might be used to refer to circumstances in which people felt less well-off than others. But as a question relating to her own situation, she was clear that despite some financial difficulties, she had never been poverty-stricken. Her comments revealed a deep concern to distance herself from the idea that she was poor. Her use of the term appeared to refer not simply to an inability to secure sufficient material resources but to a more general state of incapacity and helplessness which was seen to constitute the subjectivity of poor people. There was an implicit moral assertion that she would never allow such a thing to happen to herself.

Some respondents qualified their use of poverty by terms such as 'real' or 'genuine to suggest that while poverty was often treated as a matter of relative deprivation, the truly poor were those whose circumstances were so dire that they were unable to help themselves. In some cases, a distinction was drawn between a deserving category of poor people distinguished from those who experienced financial difficulty largely as a result of their own personal mismanagement or irresponsibility. In the latter case, claims of poverty were regarded as self-indulgent. Ann was dismissive of many people's claims to be poor. She felt that in most cases, they were not poor, but simply failed to manage their money properly or lacked sufficient effort or drive.

> *When people use words like poverty, what kind of things and what kind of level of living standards for example do you think they're talking about ?*
>
> It depends on who you're talking about. I mean there's a lot of people... I mean I've really become hard over the years. I used to walk along the street and all the beggars, you know, with their tin out and I put money in every single purse. I don't do that now. I go straight past. Cause I've been on the dole and I know... I mean I did manage by myself and with 2 kids on dole money, you know. Okay, it was only for three months, three or four months, it wasn't that long... but you can manage. And yet these people, they've probably got more money than I have and I'm out working full-time... begging on the streets. Cause they still get their cheque... their dole. And most of them have got a house to live in. I mean I feel there's a few that haven't. But erm... all they do is to drink... they drink their money... and it really annoys me that, you know. So I just ignore beggars now. There is... there's poverty and poverty. I mean a lot of people will say that they're on the poverty-line. They're not on the poverty-line. (Ann)

The implicit understanding of poverty contained in this extract was one which equated poverty with a notion of poor people as the 'deserving' poor. The poor were viewed as the needy and suffering. Social assistance was to be given to them on the basis that they were without resources and unable to help themselves. Lacking agency, they were blameless. By contrast, those who endured a low standard of living but were capable of helping themselves, were regarded as not genuinely poor. This conception of poverty appeared to relate to a tradition of social policy concerned with helping only those in absolute need. Thus, only those in a state of incapacity were regarded as poor and deserving while those who retained a measure of personal agency were considered neither poor nor eligible for social assistance.

These ideas were found among other respondents. Pam, for example, who was young, single and unemployed, was dismissive of the claim that local people were poor. She drew on a common stereotype of the 'undeserving' poor in order to back her view that local people who claimed to be poor were not genuinely in need.

> Lots of people around here think they're poor, but it just comes down to how they spend their money. I mean a friend of mine was in the pub the other night complaining that he had no money to buy a new powercard, but he was there all night spending his money on beer. You hear lots of parents saying they don't have the money to buy things for their children. But it's not that the kids are going without things they really need... but that their parent are imposing their own ideas of what they think their children should have. They want to spend money on computer games and... things for their kids when the children would be better enjoying themselves in other ways.

Intrinsic to this understanding of poverty was the view that poverty was not merely a state of relative deprivation or financial difficulty but some more fundamental lack of resources by which poor people were distinguished and set apart from others. This was evident in examining respondents' explanations of why they themselves were not poor and how their own situation differed from those they regarded as poor. Various criteria were invoked to create and sustain distinctions considered characteristic of a supposedly separate and distinct category of poor people. This helped establish a clear distinction between 'the poor' and other people like themselves. The use of terms like 'essentials', 'real' poverty and 'poverty-stricken' all served to construct a boundary on the other side of which people were deemed to be poor. In defining poverty as an extreme condition associated with a distinct social group or category of the population, respondents affirmed their own identity as 'ordinary' people.

> *Would you therefore consider yourself or your living standards as poor?*
> Well, I wouldnae say poor, say maybe average, I suppose, like everybody else, I dunno.
> *Average for the people living around here?*
> Average for unemployed, I would say, I suppose everybody's in the same situation.
> (Mary)

On this basis, respondents rejected the idea that they were poor because they did not believe that the experience of relative deprivation set them apart from other people in the manner suggested by their understanding of the word poverty. They emphasised

their moral worthiness by stressing that their children did not go without, that they did not rely on charity, that they would not let themselves become that desperate and so on. For Lynne, the important point was that however bad her situation, she pulled through and survived. She struggled to keep on going and never gave up.

It was this sense of actively struggling against and coping with adversity that accounted for the belief held by most respondents that they were not actually poor. For their perception of what it meant to be poor was one which emphasised the transformation of poor people's consciousness, subjectivity and social identity. The poor were constituted as a separate social group defined in terms of their functional incapacity and loss of agency. Individuals experienced poverty not simply as a struggle to make ends meet, but as a surrender of their will, their status, their dignity and pride. Respondents did not blame 'the poor' for failing to prevent their slide into poverty. Rather, they were perceived as without agency and at a distance from their own lives. It was expressions of pity, rather than empathy or hostility that they displayed towards this group.

Poverty, agency and moral adequacy

Respondents comments on poverty were influenced above all by their consciousness of the social meanings attached to being identified as poor and what this signified in terms of the relationship between their self and society. It was clear that they recognised a variety of meanings of poverty and for this reason were careful to qualify their use of the term when speaking about their own circumstances. In some cases, their statements on poverty were based upon a clear and unambiguous assessment of their own material well-being in relation to other people whom they regarded as better or worse-off than themselves. But their subjective expressions on poverty were often based on the need to sustain a positive view of themselves and to manage the impressions of others rather than on an objective assessment of their own and other people's material circumstances.

When respondents described themselves as poor they were careful to show that this was the result of particular circumstances that lay outside of their control rather than a product of their own individual failure. Used in this sense, poverty referred to the condition of being poor, rather than the personal characteristics of poor people. It was their circumstances and not their individual actions that defined them as poor.

They did not acquire a particular subjectivity or identity as poor people which separated them from other people. Although poverty was associated with restricted agency, they did not see themselves simply as hopeless victims of circumstance. To the contrary, they made a great deal of their ability to affect their situation, despite the constraints they faced and emphasised the crucial role they played in maintaining and improving their overall well-being. They fully expected that their circumstances would change over time giving scope for improvement in their living conditions and opportunities in the future.

The second main conception of poverty apparent among those interviewed was based on an understanding of poor people as a distinct social group. What placed people within the category of poor people was not simply their conditions of material deprivation, but their inability to cope, their loss of agency and their lack of personal control. No real explanation of how people became poor or how they remained in (or escaped from) poverty was provided. This contrasted strongly with the view of poverty as a function of a person's circumstances, which allowed scope for people to move into and out of poverty over time. When poverty was conceptualised in terms of a distinct social group of poor people, the latter tended to be regarded as a particular social type fixed in poverty forever.

When respondents denied that they were poor it was not so much that poor people were seen as blameworthy or morally inferior. In fact, poor people were spoken about sympathetically, rather than being held responsible for their condition. Those who were seen as undeserving, irresponsible, lazy, etc. were excluded from the category of poverty on the basis that they were not genuinely poor. Paradoxically, the fact that poor people were seen as deserving in the sense that they were unable to help themselves and therefore had a clear and uncontested claim for social welfare, meant that in practice they were regarded as a stigmatised category. Respondents' perceptions of themselves as not poor seemed to stem from a conception of poverty in which poor people acquired an object status and were defined in terms of their functional incapacity and loss of agency.

As we saw in the earlier part of this chapter, respondents' own accounts emphasised their active efforts to survive, to stay on top of things and overcome the difficult conditions that they faced. Their denials of poverty were marked by a tenacious assertion of their individuality and agency against the categorisation of their lives as poor. They did not feel that their subjectivity, self-consciousness and identity had

been transformed by their material circumstances. In asserting a sense of themselves as actors, they resisted their subordination to a category which reduced their lives and experiences to a set of material and social deprivations. Even where they reported experiences of social, material and psychological distress, these people still felt they had choices to make, could affect their situation and were responsible for keeping themselves and their families out of poverty through their own efforts and abilities.

In their use and understanding of the term poverty, one detects a clear desire to present themselves as morally adequate and capable members of society, by demonstrating their ability to overcome rather than succumb to the disadvantages and problems that they faced. Although they did not hold the poor as morally responsible for their condition, the avoidance of poverty in their own lives was regarded as a moral duty and a matter of personal pride and competence. There was a tension in many of these accounts as people tried to assure themselves and the interviewer that they were managing, that they would pull through and that their circumstances would improve. Identifying 'the poor' as a separate social group was a means of objectifying and locating those fears outside of themselves and displacing them onto others assigned the identity of poor people. This strengthened their perception of themselves as capable human agents and established a basis for their own social inclusion as members of society. Thus through demonstrating their personal competence and resistance in the face of adversity, they bridged the gap between their self and society and displayed their moral virtue and commitment to social norms.

Conclusion

The key finding of the initial phase of the research, described in this chapter, was that those I interviewed did not generally regard themselves as 'poor'. Using a measure of poverty based on the level of state benefits, 12 out of my 16 respondents appeared to be currently in income poverty or on the margins of poverty. And yet only two of those interviewed considered themselves poor. The interviews also revealed that there was no direct correspondence between particular material and social circumstances and subjective expressions of poverty Even where respondents described periods of hardship, financial difficulty and material shortage in the past, they did not generally look upon these as experiences of poverty.

It became clear that people attached different meanings to poverty according to the context in which it was discussed, whether it was spoken about as a personal experience or a public issue and to whom the term was being applied - themselves or other people. The small number of people who agreed, when asked, that they were poor went to great lengths to stress that being poor was an outcome of their present circumstances (e.g. as a single-parent on Income Support), but not a permanent feature of their lives. They did not regard themselves as poor in the sense of being unable to manage and found it difficult to reconcile themselves with the image of poor people that they held. They believed they were poor because their circumstances placed them in a position which greatly restricted their agency.

Overall, this suggested that two main conceptions of poverty were present. In the first conception, emphasis was placed on the circumstances that made people poor, rather than on 'poor people' as a distinct social group. Poverty was described in terms of particular circumstances which resulted in an inadequate income and a low standard of living in relation to other groups. It was not a function of individual agency and capability. The second main conception of poverty associated conditions of material hardship and deprivation with a particular identity as poor people indicating an inability to function according to social norms. The poor were differentiated from other people by their neediness, their functional incapacity and loss of agency. The articulation of two different conceptions gave rise to some ambiguity in respondents' statements on poverty. Generally, they related poverty to their own lives only in the sense of their relative lack of material resources compared to other groups.

I had expected respondents to provide a great deal of information about the experience of poverty which would relate to their experience of material hardship at the present time or in the past. However, they refused to represent their lives simply in terms of the constraints and forms of subjection that they experienced. At stake, I believe, was their concern to maintain a sense of dignity and personal worth in circumstances which appeared to deny them these. This depended on the constant reinforcement of the distinction between their own lives and those of other people deemed less able to cope and more firmly embedded in poverty. In this respect, respondents argued that it was their strength of character in responding to material hardship that differentiated them from other people less able to cope. They constructed accounts of their resistance to and personal competence in managing the

difficulties and disadvantages that they faced in order to demonstrate their membership of the wider moral community and maintain their self-respect and dignity. Thus although poverty was depicted as a state of affairs beyond the scope of agency, it was through providing evidence of their personal agency that they established their status as non-poor persons.

Chapter 5. Poverty, place and identity: community activists' accounts of the locality

Introduction

In the previous chapter I set out to explore how poverty was experienced by individuals over the course of their lives. Some of the important themes to emerge in respondents' accounts concerned the way in which they interpreted their own material circumstances and personal well-being. In particular, it became apparent that respondents held two contrasting conceptions of poverty. Poverty was used to indicate particular circumstances associated with a lack of resources and opportunities, in which case the term carried no stigma or reference to personal ability or competence. But poverty was also used to denote a particular subjectivity and identity associated with 'poor people', distinguished above all by their lack of agency and dependent status. In this sense, poverty was inevitably tied to questions concerning the personal capability, worth and moral adequacy of individuals. It was for this reason that many of those interviewed rejected the idea that they were 'poor', even though they reported periods of hardship and privation in their lives.

This chapter continues to explore the relationship between social meanings of poverty and personal questions of identity and status. But attention is shifted away from the personal experience of individuals to the problems and issues affecting the locality as a whole. One of the major themes that emerged from the first stage of interviews concerned the social meanings through which people interpreted their particular material and social circumstances and their presentation of themselves as competent social agents, actively engaged in maintaining their dignity and moral worthiness in a context in which these were called into doubt. This raised a number of interesting questions about the relationships between poverty, agency and identity for individuals. In this respect, the notion of community was of particular significance both in mediating the experience of poverty and as a source of social identity and collective action.

One particular issue that emerged in the first set of interviews, which was not explored in depth in the last chapter, concerned people's feelings about the area in which they lived. These centred on the effects of living in an area designated as poor,

needy and deprived and which also carried the stigma of being associated with drugs, crime and social problems. It was clear that a large number of community projects and groups in the area were funded through Urban Programme money as a response to the needs and problems associated with the area's status as a 'poverty' area. There appeared an implicit link between the funding of community-based organisations and the alleviation of poverty and its symptoms in the area. This supposed a particular set of understandings both about the nature of poverty and its relation to particular local problems and needs in the area and about the role and value of community-based groups and initiatives in the lives of local people.

My aim in the second half of this thesis was to explore how community action was perceived as a means of addressing the concerns and issues identified by local people in the area. Of particular interest was the way in which poverty was understood in relation to these community approaches and the different understandings of the relationship between poverty and local problems underlying the aims and objectives of local community projects and initiatives. This chapter therefore signals a shift in focus from the consideration of poverty as a personal question in the lives of individuals to the meaning of poverty as it related to the 'community' and to the social conditions and problems experienced by residents of the area. The issues I address in this and the following chapter relate to the collective identity, social position and actions of local people. My contention is that there exists a relationship between the meaning of poverty understood by local people and their involvement in particular forms of community activity, which is to do with the construction of an acceptable identity and sense of social inclusion.

The chapter is based on a second stage of interviews carried out with local community activists involved in a variety of local groups and organisations. These interviews were concerned with people's perceptions of the problems and issues at the level of the community, rather than their own personal circumstances and experiences, as in the last chapter. Here, I focus on what poverty meant for local activists and consider the various conceptions of poverty that emerged in their accounts in describing the conditions and experiences of local people. In the following chapter, I concentrate on the meaning of community for local activists and their perception of the interests, incentives and attachments of local people. I identify several distinct approaches to community activity and look at how each of these is associated with a particular conceptual framework concerning the relationship between material welfare, social position and identity.

Community activists' accounts of local issues and concerns

The fieldwork for this part of the study took the form of a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with people identified as local community activists. This meant that all the respondents were actively involved in community groups, organisations and initiatives in the area. The selection of people for interview took place after first undertaking a survey of community organisations in the area, using various local directories. A list of local organisations was drawn up and details collected about their activities, the areas in which they operated and so on. A number of local workers were consulted in order to establish the more prominent groups and the key individuals within these groups. The final selection of activists was made in order to ensure that those interviewed represented a broad range of interests, needs, activities and neighbourhoods within Royston Park.

A mix of activists was achieved which included those employed as project workers in more formal organisations, volunteers in local groups and community activities, representatives of particular neighbourhoods or interest groups and those involved in various action groups and local campaigns. In total, 17 local activists were interviewed. These interviews explored the views of people who spoke for and about the 'community', the problems of the area and the needs of local people generally. The interviews lasted anywhere between 40 minutes and 3 hours and all were taped. Further details about the individuals contacted, the organisations and groups they were involved in, their position within these groups and so on is included in Appendix 1.

My principal aim was to examine the role and significance of community-based activity from the perspective of those engaged in local groups and organisations. When I use the term 'community-based activity', I do so to refer to collective actions undertaken by local people which seek to meet the needs and aspirations of local residents and to improve their welfare and quality of life. Many of the community activists I interviewed had been instrumental in setting up, developing and running various local groups and initiatives. Some were actually employed in a full or part-time capacity as staff in local projects. Others had developed a role for themselves as local representatives and spokespeople for the area generally, or for particular neighbourhoods or groups of the local population.

The significance of investigating the views of local activists is that their accounts do not deal simply with their own personal experiences as individuals. At the same time, they are not simply detached and objective accounts of the social issues and problems faced by other people in a particular social milieu, separate from their own lives. As active members of the community they operate at the interface of the private world of personal experience and the public world of social problems and responses, interpreting the latter in relation to the former and vice versa. Some activists provide more personal accounts of their involvement in community activity and their experience of living in the area and tend to focus on the particular issues that have affected them as individuals. In other cases, activists present their accounts in a more objective and impersonal style. They speak as people with an intimate knowledge of local problems, campaigns and issues, but sufficiently detached to be able to present a general picture of life in the area. In most cases, respondents' accounts fell somewhere between the two, combining anecdotal and biographical discourse with more objectively-presented statements concerning the needs or problems of particular sections of the community.

The interviews with community activists were designed to be more focused and structured than the first set of interviews. They were less concerned with biographical details and more with respondents' perceptions of the locality, the nature of the local community, the meaning of poverty in relation to local people's lives and the role of community action. An interview guide was drawn up to ensure that the same topics were covered in all the interviews (although not necessarily in the same order). Full details of this can be found in Appendix 2. It was based on three main sets of questions:

- First, people were asked about their experience of living in the area and their view of the major issues and concerns facing local people. In particular, they were asked about the relationship between local problems and poverty in the area.

- A second set of questions dealt with their involvement in community groups and activities, how and why they had become involved and their perception of the value and purpose of the various groups and activities in which they were involved.

- A third set of questions looked at how local activists perceived the role of community activity generally in the area and its contribution to local people's welfare.

At an early stage, several distinct approaches were apparent in the way that activists discussed local issues and problems. Some activists spoke widely and generally about the processes affecting the area as a whole, while others offered more narrowly focused accounts concentrating on the needs and issues for particular groups. Some accounts centred on the personal effects and consequences for local people of trying to manage on a low income, while others focused more on forms of provision and local action generated within the community. These differences can best be illustrated by looking at the accounts of four particular individuals among those interviewed, presented below.

Eve

Eve first became involved in the community as a volunteer helper with a local elderly project. She is now currently employed in a local community organisation and has recently been nominated as a neighbourhood representative. She is married with children and lives in a house that she and her husband are buying, situated in a neighbourhood of mainly private houses. The enhancement of her own job prospects and income through her work in the community contrasts with her husband's increasing difficulty in finding employment. Drawing on her own personal experience, she discusses at length the difficulties that local people face in trying to improve their position and secure a reasonable standard of living. In this respect she focuses on the lack of affordable childcare, the need for more training and education opportunities and the consequences of living in a negative social environment.

In discussing the problems of the area, it is the personal and subjective aspects of people's situations that she highlights. In her view, the benefits system, the poor state of housing and perceived lack of opportunities combine to remove people's incentive to look for work and improve their lives. This results in feelings of apathy, fatalism and hopelessness among people in the area who become trapped by their negative attitudes and loss of incentive as well as by the lack of employment and training opportunities. The feeling of being "backed up against a wall" is something that Eve has experienced in her own life:

> I can remember in Blackmuir, the feeling that what's the point of being in this house because it was damp and it was dirty. You werenae encouraged to look after your property, staying in a damp house riddled with mice. So you began to feel a bit depressed really, staying in these conditions whereas when you're along... back when you've bought your house you feel like saying, I'll do this, because it's your own house. [...] When we stayed in Blackmuir there was no incentive to go out... for my husband to go out and find work. It was like if he was unemployed it didnae matter if he didnae find work right away, he would sign on and have a few months maybe doing nothing. Whereas now, he's not got that, he cannae sign on when he's not got work, he's got to get hesself a job.

Eve recognises the social constraints and barriers that local people face and does not see these as the fault of people themselves. But she also believes that individuals can overcome these constraints through their own effort and determination. She describes how she and her husband took out a mortgage and removed themselves to a better neighbourhood within the same area. She feels that other people remain caught in a cycle of dependency and apathy because they have no real incentive or opportunity to improve their circumstances.

> ... like we bought this house and my husband passed his driving test, he got hesself a car and that incentive wasnae there in Blackmuir. I don't know if he would have done that if we were staying in Blackmuir because the car would probably have... well it might not have... but there's a good chance it would have been vandalised or stolen. So your incentive isnae there to do these kind of things, you know what I mean?

In discussing the social problems in the area she constructs a division between 'decent' community-minded individuals and those she regards as 'bad elements', who threaten the security and welfare of others. The latter are blamed for bringing the area down and forcing 'decent' people like herself to leave the area in search of a 'better' neighbourhood. Again, she draws on her own experience:

> We were forced to move out of Blackmuir Park because of the drug problems and glue bags... the children were coming in with glue bags. [...] But I do have good memories of Blackmuir. The first 6 years there were good and I wouldn't have moved but for the drug problems. Our neighbours when we first moved were young with a new baby and would do things like take your washing in if it was raining and you were away out and so on. But over the years, the neighbours who would stop and chat to you slowly moved away

> and then I realised about ten neighbours had gone away. We were getting young men into the flats they used to occupy and they had all their friends round and were leaving needles in the stair. There were alcoholics and people banging on your door saying their friends had overdosed. The crunch came when my son who was 3 came home with a glue bag and was imitating what they were doing with them. So we felt backed into a corner.

She therefore identifies with the more deserving, respectable and capable members of the community who she sees as held back by the negative environment in which they are forced to live. This leads her to a particular interpretation of the role of community activity in enhancing the personal capabilities, skills and confidence of individuals and helping to remove the barriers that hold them back. Eve refers to her own experience of groupwork and confidence-building within a local women's organisation and sees this as a general model for helping people improve their situation.

> That was what was really good about WETP [Women's Employment and Training Programme]. It got you out of that thinking that I'm going to be like this for the next so many years and I cannae ever see myself getting out of this... and there's a lot of women who do think like that, even married women who have got children. WETP has helped them to say what could you be doing in the meantime... there's a creche provided here for a couple of hours a week so you could go to a class and get some modules and maybe after... It's got to come from the person and most of the time it does come from the person their-self, wanting to go on and do things. [...] There's a lot of men as well who dinnae get involved in groups and who are really quite depressed I think, who havenae got the confidence or dinnae feel... I think there's a lot of men who do feel depressed and worthless.[...] There should be something for men as well... to be given that confidence to try new things. If you've got a depressed man in the house and you've got children, you know the whole family unit and the children are affected just by this one depressed person in the house. And then maybe the children start getting a bit depressed and anti-social and doing things to get attention and... I think that a lot of problems stem from that of that aspect of poverty... if you call being unemployed that.

Her concentration on the negative personal consequences for individuals of living in a poor run-down area gives rise to a particular understanding of community-based activity. For Eve, community organisations have their main impact at a personal level by helping to increase incentive, skills and confidence.

Cathy.

Cathy is a single-parent and moved to the area three years ago. She initially helped set up a local creche and this was followed by work in a youth club, a community education centre and most recently, a drop-in project for single mothers. She has been a spokesperson and organiser in several local action groups. She sees herself as having a particular knowledge and insight into the issues and problems faced by various groups in the area. Unlike Eve, she does not draw on her own personal experiences or difficulties to illustrate general problems and issues in the area. Instead, she tends to remove and separate her own self from the problems and issues she describes in the community. As an activist, she sees her role in terms of working with and helping to organise various issue groups, passing on her own knowledge and skills to others and representing their interests.

She highlights two main aspects of her role as an activist. First of all, she points to her possession of organisational skills and an ability to represent the interests of other people. Second, she feels she has an understanding and empathy towards the groups with whom she works. As a local activist, she believes she plays an important mediating role between the particular needs of local people and the concerns of professional workers from outside of the area. She sees herself therefore as a kind of unofficial and unqualified community worker, possessing certain skills that she can bring to groups and transfer to the individuals within them. She describes her involvement in a local childcare campaign as follows:

> It's not just that it was personal to me but as a worker, and with being in the area a certain length of time and working there with women, I knew how difficult it was for them to return to education and employment. Some of the women I worked with had 3 or 4 children, they were single-parents, there was just no way that they could come off Income Support to work part-time or to work for a measly wage and pay a child-minder at the same time. And I thought they're always going to live like this unless they get an opportunity to go back into education and full-time employment where they're being paid a decent wage and being able to leave their children in the hands of professional care and not having to pay astronomical amounts of money. And I looked around and I thought there is going to be a lot of people that are always going to be in this situation unless something's done about it. And so as a worker and somebody who's personally involved in it, it was very important to me... It is something that I feel very strongly about. But I think being involved in the childcare action group helped me immensely in

> my work, not only as a volunteer but as a paid worker, it helped me to really look at some of the work that I was doing. I know I had some organisational skills before, but again I think it helped me to brush up on those... like there were certain ways of working and helped me to look back at my work, to take a back-seat and look at what's actually happening, and work better. Also, it did help me with my confidence, although I've always been fairly confident, because when you are working in an area like Milton you learn to... you have to speak up for others because there is people who are like, oh no, I cannae say anything because I'm not any good at that kind of thing... but then you think, yes you are, because I felt exactly the same and look where I am now. So it helped me to help others.

In contrast to Eve, she locates the problems experienced by local residents within a wider social and economic context, so they are not seen as peculiar to the area or to local people. This is apparent in her analysis of the problems faced by single-parent mothers:

> What happens is that a lot of single-parents end up doing low paid jobs, like cleaning, where they're paid about £1.50 or £2 an hour and where at night they can get their mum or their boyfriend or whoever to look after the child. It's buckshee money, that's it. And that's the kind of job opportunities they have, because it's the only thing that fits in with how their living, their life-style, which is shocking. I mean there has got to be more opportunities than that for them. I think that now it's something that is around for a lot of women, not just here. [...] So it's something that's happening all over because women don't have the same opportunities as men because of the fact that they've got children and because childcare provision is not seen as a priority. So women are left at the bottom. They're the last when it comes to job opportunities.

Her focus is on the wider structural constraints faced by local people, rather than the personal consequences for those who are its victims. In her view, the concentration of dependent social groups in the area increases the need for better support, facilities and services for local groups in the area or in a particular neighbourhood within it. Cathy rejects the notion that the area is a 'problem' area, although she admits that before she moved into the area she viewed it in that way. She does not deny the existence of social problems and anti-social behaviour among people in the area. But argues that these problems affect only a minority and do not affect her personally or overwhelm the community as a whole. In her opinion, such problems are common everywhere now and not confined to places like Royston Park. They are a product of

wider, non-local forces and government policies that disadvantage certain groups wherever they live.

Irene.

Irene has lived in the area for over 40 years and her account draws upon her long personal history of running clubs, community activities and playschemes. She offers this account of her involvement in community activity:

> I have been involved in playschemes, pensioners' groups, young mothers' groups, community action fighting for the betterment of the area. 30 years ago we were fighting the district council when they were putting the rents up for households with someone, a son or daughter, over 18 or 21. So I have always been active and am still now. You name it, I'm involved in it...but playschemes are my baby, I love my playschemes. It's junkies need their injections and I need my injection of playschemes. And this is what I call my fix. I give up 5 weeks of my summer holidays for this. [...] I think myself, it's something... community spirit is born into you. If you come from a family that are community activists, you grow up to be one yourself and... I have. And my mum and dad came into the area, were activists in the area, they were chairpersons and everything [...] and so therefore dragged along is maybe a better word. And it spreads like a cancer. And you meet people. I'm still friendly with people that I've known from my early days till now. I've seen how the community activity has grown, from the wee Milton community centre with all it's clubs. A lot of marriages were made through the centre, that's how we met our partners.

Her involvement in local activities and groups springs from a strong sense of community, grounded in a tradition of hard work, resourcefulness, self-reliance and mutual aid. She laments the fact that community spirit has been weakened by an increase in material values and the influx of new residents having little attachment or commitment to community values. She looks back to a time when most people in the area were employed and a strong local community existed as the basis of social activity and informal networks.

> A lot of the older people will complain that the community is not what it used to be, but there's also a lot of older ones still working in the community. There's not a lot of community (now?). It's like the tide, it comes in and out [...] and you do get community. But you see people years ago [...] people didn't have a lot of things, they didn't have a lot

> of material things. You were lucky if 1 in 20 people had a car. And television was a new invention as far as we were concerned. People aren't community-minded because years ago a lot of them were working but the mums were at home. But nowadays mums are having to work so therefore with the new influx of the bought houses, the selling off of the houses, and the new people are material minded. They want to see how many cars they have, how many thick-pile carpets they...all the different things and that. And there's more having to work...maybe a lot of them are having to work but they'd maybe like to be like us.

At the same time, she believes that high unemployment has deprived many people of the opportunity to participate as respectable citizens and members of the community. In her opinion, the decline of the area is related to these processes which have left many people excluded from the labour market and dependent on welfare benefits and social provision. The importance that she attaches to employment is in terms of the opportunities it provides for social participation, self-fulfilment and a sense of worth. Without work, many young people slide into a world of drink, drugs, depression and crime. It is clear that such people are regarded as the victims of social pressures and constraints.

> ... they werenae born junkies. They werenae born depressed people. They weren't born alcoholics. It's just maybe that they're seeing society letting them down. That's how it is.

For Irene, community activity has an important role to play in overcoming the alienation and exclusion of those dependent on welfare. This conviction is tied to a view of the community as a traditional source of mutual aid and support and a suspicion of forms of state provision which reduce the dignity and self-respect of working-class people. She believes that a range of community activities and self-help groups can help alleviate the negative effects of unemployment by providing constructive opportunities through which people can gain a sense of purpose, membership and self-worth.

Pat.

Pat is also a long-term resident in the area. For some years, she has been the project manager of a local project which has become a focal point for collective action and community campaigns. In her account of local problems and issues she, like Irene, highlights the importance of unemployment and increasing job insecurity. But she

places these within a larger frame of reference which explains the disadvantaged position of local residents in terms both of wider social and economic forces and residence in a stigmatised area. She talks of a spiral of decline in the area caused by a lack of investment, resulting in the deterioration of the housing and environment, the flight of better-off residents and an inflow of the most hard-pressed and vulnerable.

> The major change over the years has been the decline of the area, the housing, shops, schools. [Back in the 1970s] they were starting to decline because the money had not been going into them so people started moving out and they became hard-to-let. They were getting damp and the buildings were getting a run down look. Once that sets in, people don't take the same pride in them. Where they had had trees, they had been taken out and concrete put in. That was because the kids were making a mess with the earth and the care-takers were fed up cleaning it up. But the kids had no proper or safe play area at all and nothing to stimulate them, so you couldn't blame them. More desperate people who didn't have a lot going for them started moving in... not that it was their fault, but unemployment had started rising etc. That was in 70s. It was a constant battle trying to keep your wee bit nice. As things got worse, most of the original tenants had moved out [...] Never got it. The Local Authority was Tory and they were obviously not committed to council housing. The houses were getting in a bad state, rotten windows, cause open to all weathers, dampness, etc. [...] The tenants are clear that the blame for the decline of the housing and environment in the locality lies with the council, because they just weren't interested in council housing. Then when the council did change, the problems were then so bad it was going to take massive amounts of money to do anything. Eventually blocks were renovated, but it was too late, cause no one wanted to live in them anymore. A lot of people were taking offers of housing outside the area because there was no decent housing in the area, which was sad. A lot say they regret it now. If there had been decent housing these people wouldn't have moved out of the area. The whole area needs to be lifted.

Her account focuses on the nature of the social and political processes affecting local residents as a whole, rather than the specific needs of particular groups or individuals. In her discussion of health issues, housing, or employment she stresses the role and responsibility of government, employers, business and public agencies and the consequences of their actions and their failure to address the needs of the area generally. She believes that local people are disadvantaged in terms of their socio-economic position, their poor living conditions and the stigma they experience.

But in spite of this, they retain their values, their pride and their respectability. She rejects the idea that local people have become passive welfare dependants, overwhelmed by problems and needs. Instead, she emphasises the strength and resilience of local residents, their capacity to survive and overcome the hardships they experience and their commitment to community-based activity.

> In this small area there are a lot of community groups. There's a good community spirit and people in these groups are committed to making the area better. For people to look in at us from the outside and to think that we're all walking around with long faces is just not true. But we've never ever hidden from the problems that we've got. And we've always recognised that there are a lot of problems...but tried to handle it in a positive way, rather than run away from it. For a period in the late 70s up until the middle of the 80s, people were wanting out. I would definitely say it's settled a bit and the people who are here are here, a lot of them, because they choose to be and want to do something about it.

However, local people alone cannot be expected to overcome the problems they face without a change in attitude and commitment from government departments, the business community and employers. This means building up strong community organisations which can present a united front in dealings with outside agencies and extract more resources for the area. Her aim is above all, to reverse the spiral of decline that has set in and to make the area a positive place to live through creating a strong sense of community identity and pride, along with better housing, an attractive environment and good local facilities.

> ...what we do need is a plan. But we don't want to begin a plan so that people who get jobs will immediately say right, we've got a wee bit more money now, we'll move out. We want the people to still want to stay in this area. So to encourage people to stay in the area you've to provide a lot of resources or services, or both. You have to have employment, you have to have decent housing, you have to have play areas, community centres, good shops, even recreational things. Cause people don't work all the time so there has to be something for them to do when they're not working. And I think that all of these things go together as being very important.

The purpose of community action is therefore empowerment, to increase people's ability to manage and take control of their lives and to press for changes in local policy and provision. Better conditions will help lift morale, create a sense of pride

in the community and ultimately help change the negative reputation and stigma of the area.

Four perspectives on the problems and issues affecting the locality

These four accounts are distinct, both in their emphasis and in their presentation of local issues and problems. Eve, for example, draws very much on her own experience so that her understanding of local problems and issues focuses on the personal constraints, difficulties and set-backs experienced by 'ordinary' people living in the area. Cathy, offers a much more detached account focusing on the specific needs and difficulties faced by different social groups in the locality due to their lack of resources and support. For Irene, the community - as a source of social relationships, identity and welfare - occupies a central place in her account. Local problems are related to the increase in the numbers of people now excluded from the labour market and the gradual decline in community structures and support networks. Finally, Pat sees local issues in relation to wider social, political and economic processes which have caused financial hardship and job insecurity local people. Residents are doubly disadvantaged by their poor housing conditions, lack of facilities and the stigma of living in a 'deprived' area.

What can be learnt from these four individual accounts about the general patterns and differences in the way that activists approach local issues? I shall argue that two areas of difference separated the accounts of the activists described above, which gave rise to four distinct approaches to local problems and issues. One area of difference concerned the style of accounts, with some speakers presenting an account of local issues and problems in a detached and impersonal manner while others drew far more on their personal knowledge and experience. The significance of this was that in the case of the latter, attention was directed more at the personal troubles and difficulties experienced by individuals while in the former case, local problems were commonly discussed in the context of wider social processes.

Accounts which made frequent reference to people's demoralisation and inaction tended to concentrate on the differences between individuals and groups in the locality in terms of their strategies and resilience, their incentive and motivation and their agency and ability to change their situation. Despite this tendency to focus on the incapacity, dependence and helplessness of some groups of the population, individuals were rarely blamed for their lack of effort or determination. Instead,

there was a recognition of the nature of the forces and constraints that made it difficult for individuals to break out of the sense of demoralisation or alienation they experienced. Some activists placed much more emphasis on the structural constraints and lack of resources that people faced on account of their social position and circumstances. This did not mean that individuals were regarded simply as the passive victims of macro-processes beyond their control. Rather, they were seen as active social agents engaged in strategies to resist and overcome the constraints that they faced.

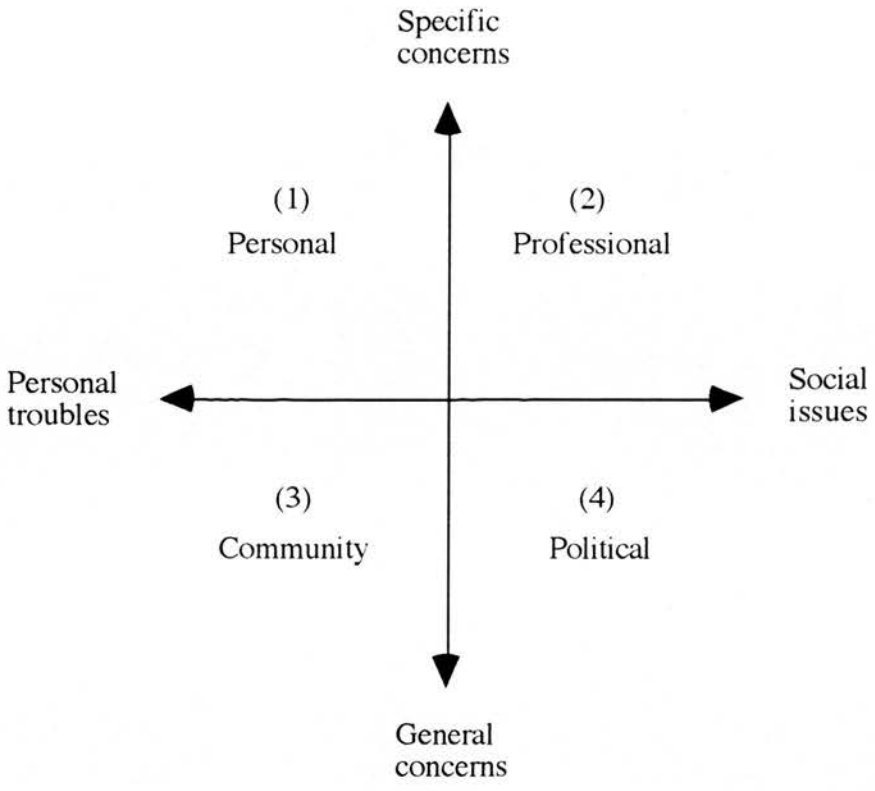
A second major difference in the accounts of community activists concerned the range of the concerns expressed and the generality of the issues and problems identified. In some cases, it became clear that activists held only a limited and partial view of local problems and issues. Their accounts referred to a small number of specific concerns, often reflecting a narrow involvement in single-issue groups and campaigns. They tended not to speak about the community as a whole, but confined themselves to the interests of particular groups or neighbourhoods within the area. This was in direct contrast to other activists who took a more comprehensive view of the locality. These activists did not deny the existence of a range of competing and sectional interests, but emphasised the importance of community-wide activity and organisations which worked in the interests of all residents.

On the basis of these key differences in the accounts of community activists, it is possible to construct a 2-dimensional typology which produces 4 separate positions in relation to local problems and issues. It consists of two axes defined in terms of:

- The degree to which their accounts focus more on aspects of personal agency or on the nature of the social constraints affecting local people.

- The extent to which the analysis of local issues emphasises the common interests of residents as a whole or the specific needs and concerns of particular sections of the population.

Combining these 2 dimensions enables us to define four ideal-type positions which I refer to as personal, professional, community and political perspectives. We can represent these diagramatically in the following way:



The accounts of the four activists described above each conform to one of these four perspectives. Thus, Eve's account draws on a 'personal' perspective; Cathy offers a more 'professional' perspective; Irene expresses views compatible with a 'community' perspective; and Pat comes close to a 'political' perspective. These 4 perspectives should not be viewed simply as ideological or theoretical positions to be labelled individualist, structuralist and so on. Rather, they should be seen as practical ways of making sense. I offer a brief summary of the main points of each in turn.

1. Personal perspective

In this perspective, views about the area, the circumstances of local people and forms of community action are based explicitly on the speaker's own personal experience. There is little reference to 'the community' as a whole or to wider social issues and processes. Instead, respondents restrict themselves to talking about real individuals of whom they have a personal knowledge. Their accounts deal with problems and needs almost exclusively at the level of the individual and focus on personal feelings, troubles, and constraints. In the absence of a larger framework or

perspective, this gives rise to a rather narrow and localist view. They emphasise the need for various measures to lift people's morale, raise their confidence, increase their opportunities to take up employment and training, improve the local environment and remove the constraints that stand in their way.

2. Professional perspective

The main characteristic of this perspective is the adoption of a professional style of discourse in discussing local issues. The personal opinions and circumstances of the speaker are pushed to the background, so that a more detached and authoritative account is suggested by comparison to accounts which are based on personal experience and knowledge. Essentially, issues are discussed in terms of the constraints, needs and gaps in provision affecting particular social groups in the area. It is a language of needs (rather than a language of poverty) which dominates their discussion of local problems. The role of community organisations is to help improve the quality of life and meet the needs of particular groups within the locality. These activists do not identify with the community as a whole, but with particular interests and groups within it. They tend to support the sectional interests of particular groups or localities in seeking improved facilities and resources. In this respect they see themselves engaged in a competitive struggle with other groups and neighbourhoods for the scarce resources available.

3. Community perspective

Within this perspective we find a strong emphasis on the community as the basis of traditional working-class values of respectability, solidarity and self-reliance. These activists' understanding of community is a personal and exclusive one, based largely upon their own informal networks and associations. They complain that the community has been weakened by growing numbers of private house-owners, professional workers, newer activists and factional interests in the area. In their opinion, the increase in more specialised and formal community projects employing professional staff from outside of the area has led to increased division and fragmentation. There is a sense that local groups no longer work together to strengthen the community, but are concerned only with narrow areas of interest and with building their own separate empires. The perspective of these activists is

therefore naturally opposed and antagonistic to the growth of professionalised organisations in the area which undermine and challenge their own personal standing as local activists.

4. Political perspective

In discussions about the major problems and issues in the area, it is job insecurity, stigma and discrimination, lack of adequate resources and provision that emerge as significant concerns. These are related to wider social and economic forces and cuts in social welfare provision. In this respect, they believe that local employers and businesses should show a greater commitment to the area and take more responsibility for creating employment opportunities for local people. They refute the negative image of local people and tend to play down the extent of social and personal problems and destructive and anti-social behaviour in the area. They focus instead on the constructive values and activities of local people. The range of community groups and projects in the area are seen as an essential plank in people's coping strategies. They help to create a sense of pride and identity in the community and encourage forms of collective action as a means of gaining concessions for the area as a whole, and not just for the benefit of particular neighbourhoods or groups.

In practice, it is often not possible to match each individual respondent to a particular perspective. Where ambiguities and inconsistencies were present in their accounts, it was likely that the opinions and views expressed drew on more than one perspective. To some extent, this was an outcome of the fact that people's own views and opinions changed over time as their position and experience as community activists changed. For example, one might conjecture that newer activists who initially expressed views associated with a personal perspective would over the course of time come to adopt a more professional or political perspective. Because activists themselves were in transition, their accounts contained opinions which derived from different perspectives rather than expressing a coherent and consistent position. Rather than attempting to classify activists according to one of these four perspectives, it was better to locate their views at a point somewhere between the two extreme points which defined each of the axes.

Nevertheless, some basic patterns emerged in the circumstances of those adopting particular perspectives. It was among newer activists that a more 'personal' perspective was found. These activists tended to be involved in a narrow range of groups and concerns in which they were employed or had a personal interest. A 'professional' perspective on local issues was detected among those involved in more service-oriented projects and organisations. They often worked closely with professional workers and statutory bodies and helped provide services to meet the needs of particular sections of the local population, through community transport, creches, neighbourhood centres, youth clubs and pensioners clubs. Those who conformed closest to a 'community' perspective tended to be older women who were long-term residents of the area. They had been influential in setting up many of the informal groups and self-help organisations running in the area. Those who took a more 'political' stance were also committed and long-term activists, but tended to be younger than the last group and adopted a more combative stance in representing the community to outside bodies.

Poverty and the local community

It was observed that activists rarely used the term poverty of their own accord in describing local problems and issues. Most of their comments on poverty were made in direct response to specific questions about the nature and impact of poverty in the area. In the interviews, subjects were asked whether they considered local people to be in poverty, what it meant to be poor, what the consequences were for individuals and the community and how local initiatives might have an impact on poverty.

Several activists seemed initially unclear about how the term poverty might apply to the community as a whole or to specific groups within the locality. In some cases, their images of poverty were based on common stereotypes, e.g. starving people in the Third World or homeless beggars - at some remove from their own lives. This is apparent in the following extract from Eve's account :

> *What effect have community projects and activity had on poverty?*
> I think it depends on what way you see poverty. Is poverty a person who has no food? What is poverty? I've had this discussion before. My idea of poverty is somebody who's not got any food, finds it hard to survive day to day, very few clothes, furniture... that would be my idea of poverty... somebody really at rock bottom, that would be my idea

of poverty. But then you have poor people who are just surviving... as well. I don't think I would use it in relation to this area, it's a difficult word. But there is definitely people... it's really difficult because as well you've got a lot of single-parents in the area, you know. I'm sure if you go to any of their houses, they've all got quite nice houses because they've worked and managed to get there and scrape together a nice house and their kids are well looked after. [...] I think that the word poverty... I mean I dinnae like it... but I think that it does relate a lot to unemployment. But I always think of poverty like India and things like that.

So you think that poverty in the local community is more to do with people's expectations and worries than not being able to eat?

Aye... and the barriers you face if you're in these situations like unemployment... I think that's the poverty. I think that would be... the poverty in the area would be the unemployed... a kind of depressed state... being stuck in a situation and not knowing how to change it. (Eve)

In her initial comments, it is clear that she associates poverty with people in India, who are starving and destitute, rather than people like herself. However, later on in the interview, she decides that in the context of the local community, poverty is closely associated with unemployment. It is significant that when she describes poverty she does so principally in subjective and personal terms, referring to a condition of stagnation and lack of choice - the 'depressed state' of people 'stuck in a situation and not knowing how to change it'. There is no indication in her account that she blames 'the poor'. Instead, she locates the causes of poverty in the experience of unemployment, social deprivation, lack of opportunities and living in a negative social environment.

In this conception of poverty, it is the subjective experience and outlook associated with particular social conditions that is described, rather than the characteristics of any specific group of the population identified as poor. Some activists did however refer to particular sections of the local population as 'poor' because of their social position and circumstances. But once again, it was significant that poverty was described primarily in terms of the negative effects on people's sense of worth, their identity, attitudes and behaviour and not simply as a condition of material hardship. In the following extract, Irene identifies poverty in relation to those who are unemployed and dependent on social security benefits:

> What is poor? We have people who are unemployed cause they want to be and those who have no choice. We're not grovelling in the dirt eating the grass and berries. But we have got poverty. But I wish somebody would tell me what they mean by poverty. It's jobs. People want to work. People would love to have a job but there's not the jobs around. The way I'm sounding the now it's as though there's no poverty. There is a lot, but it depends on how you view poverty. I think if you stand at the post-offices in the area from ten past eight in the morning and see the queues of people with their giros, that's sad. I'm not talking about the pensioners, but the young people, the single-parents and that, you see them going with their books. I've got a daughter myself who's a single-parent. But you see them going into the post-office... that to me is poverty. The queues are getting longer [...] and there's a lot more... alright they've tightened up all the rules nowadays... but sometimes there's too many restrictions. I don't know how they do it. (Irene)

This conception of poverty combines both structural and cultural elements. It identifies poor people principally in terms of their exclusion from the labour market. Poverty is seen to characterise the social circumstances of people dependent on benefits who lack the opportunity to improve their lives, to provide for themselves and their families, to feel a sense of pride and worth and to gain the respect of others. However, in describing what it means to be poor, it is the erosion of personal control over one's circumstances, rather than the lack of money or deprived living conditions that is paramount. Poor people are viewed as demoralised, unable to cope and vulnerable to drink and drugs.

> I don't know if that's maybe why a lot of people go looking for something else, hence maybe the drugs, the drink, and it forms depression, suicide. I don't know if that what's called poverty or because of poverty? I've never known unemployment, my father was a regularly employed till he was 60, my husband's managed to keep a job. He was made redundant, but had a job within a fortnight. But in those days you could chop and change. Now cause of his illness, he's on invalidity benefit. (Irene)

This view of poverty therefore focuses on 'the poor' as a distinct social group within the area, defined by reference to their social circumstances (e.g. unemployment) but described in terms of their helplessness, demoralisation and alienation. We can see strong parallels with a particular conception of poverty held by respondents in the last chapter, which focused on the subjectivity and identity of poor people. In both cases, the poor are identified as a separate social category on the basis of their lack

of agency, their loss of dignity and pride and their inability to fulfil social roles and norms. They are not blamed, but perceived as the casualties of wider social and economic processes which have resulted in mass unemployment, job insecurity and lack of economic opportunities. It is a conception of poverty which combines an understanding of poverty as related to either social position and lack of material resources with a perception of poor people as defined by their helplessness, their dependent status and their incapacity as subjects.

It is among the older activists who adopt what I have called a 'community' perspective, that this understanding of poverty in terms of a distinct group of the population was most often found. It is a conception of poverty which is used in interpreting the situation of others, rather than their own circumstances and as such, it distances poverty from the speaker's own life. What is interesting is that these same activists employ a quite different conception of poverty in referring to their own personal experience. Here, poverty is used in a more inclusive sense, to establish a relationship between their own lives and the common experience of working-class families who, lacking sufficient income and job security, must struggle to make ends meet while seeking to maintain their dignity and self-respect. The distinction between these two meanings of poverty was sometimes taken to suggest that quite different forms of poverty existed. This was apparent in the belief expressed by some activists that a fundamental shift in the nature of poverty had occurred over time as the result of long-term unemployment and its impact on individuals and communities.

> ... many families with children are caught in an increasingly hopeless situation with little chance of changing and improving their circumstances. That's the difference between now and when I was young. At that time when I was a girl it was possible to get a job in Ferrantis or the bonds or somewhere to get some extra money if necessary. That option no longer exists for people in the area now. (Moira)

This activist separates her own experience of material shortage when she was young from what she describes as a condition of enforced dependency and exclusion among many people today. In the latter case, poverty is manifest as a loss of identity and community membership which results from the inability to fulfil social roles and norms of behaviour. In her own experience, it refers essentially to a situation of relative deprivation, financial insecurity and precariousness related to one's socio-economic position. This is represented as a contrast between 'traditional' forms of

poverty which relate to their own experience and more contemporary forms of poverty associated with other people in the area. This distinction appears to reflect recent popular and theoretical discourses on poverty and, in particular, the belief that a new poverty has emerged which differs in its nature and its causes from more traditional forms of poverty.

The understanding of poverty according to a more 'traditional' notion of poverty was fairly common among activists adopting a more political stance. Poverty was referred to as a general lack of resources among people in the area. It was the result of widespread job insecurity and disadvantage in the labour market, low wages and unemployment and unmet needs due to sub-standard and inadequate levels of social provision. Most importantly, it was used to describe the situation of local people in an inclusive sense by relating the experience of material hardship and disadvantage to more general processes within society.

> Well... poverty... poverty's a system we've built, I believe. There's poverty all around you and ye cannae help but be a part of that, if you live in Blackmuir, right, you're part of it. We're a lucky family because we've pulled ourselves up, we had to pull ourselves up. I dunnie want to be seen with like cap in hand... I dunnie go cap in hand... I use my wits. That way people are stuck... they've not tippled how to suss the system oot and they're stuck. They say... they use the term poverty... like I say we're all part of poverty, especially if you look [inaudible]. Poverty's not just... like not having money. It's no' having the best of health as well, you know, like when ye cannae buy decent fresh vegetables and fresh fruit. Er... poverty is in the education that the kids are getting at school. Poverty is in the housing itself... the housing... the houses, the damp... they're old, falling apart, you know what I mean. So poverty's a whole wide range of things, not just people, you know. That's what I believe is and I see as poverty. (Tommy)

This speaker sees poverty not simply as a lack of material resources, but as a structured situation of disadvantage and comparative losing out experienced by those with fewest resources. (Even in the midst of this more structuralist account of poverty, we find an imagery of poor people as dependent and incapacitated). Poverty is not restricted to those who are unemployed, but refers to the socio-economic position of residents in general and their inability to obtain adequate resources, secure employment and decent living standards. In these terms, some activists stated that poverty in the area was increasing as a result of wider social and economic forces which had a particularly strong impact in the locality.

People who have always managed to have a job, even if it's a low paid job, more of them are losing jobs and you speak to them and everyone now in this area is feeling the pinch. In the housing scheme where I live there's very few people unemployed but all of them are in difficult circumstances and just living from hand to mouth".

Does that give rise to hopelessness?

No, it just makes it very much more difficult for people to keep going, cause they don't have the same money to spend as they would have before which has a knock on effect on everything. I noticed that very few people are going away on holiday during the Trades. The worst off are people with children. Food's getting more expensive, clothes are a struggle, some even find the second-hand shops too expensive. But people shouldn't have to be doing their shopping in second-hand shops and jumble sales and having to rely on other's cast-offs for their children. That's wrong. (Pat)

What is significant here is that the speaker strongly disputes the view of local people as passive and helpless, overwhelmed by personal and social problems and unable to cope. Although this conception of poverty focuses on the constraints and barriers that local people face, their continued scope for individual agency and collective action is also emphasised. There is no indication that poverty is associated with a negative subjective outlook, pathological dependence or a separate social identity as 'poor people'. Poverty is perceived as an issue concerning the distribution of resources, opportunities and power and is not about charity, pity or anti-social behaviour. It is not seen as an attribute of a certain section of the local population identified as poor, but as a set of conditions and processes affecting all or many local residents.

Two competing conceptions of poverty

The various distinctions made by activists in discussing poverty appeared to relate closely to the meanings of poverty held by respondents in the last chapter. Many of the same underlying ideas and themes were present. Essentially, these pointed to two main conceptions of poverty. The first was dominated by images of poor people as non-agents - passive, helpless and subordinate. People were identified as poor on the basis of certain characteristics which appeared to define 'the poor' as a separate identifiable social group. In the second conception, poverty referred to a more general and widespread condition of relative deprivation, precariousness and

insecurity experienced by people. Poverty imposed constraints on people's scope for action, but did not render them non-agents. I refer to these as 'exclusive' and 'inclusive' conceptions of poverty respectively. It was apparent that these different conceptions relate to the speaker's sense of their proximity to or distance from the experience and conditions that they described.

More exclusive conceptions are those which draw a clear dividing line between the poor and non-poor, locating poverty at a distance from the speaker's own life. An example is the common association of poverty with the starving or destitute in other countries. There is a clear distance and difference established between the situation of 'the poor' and the speaker's own circumstances. Furthermore, an unambiguous link is established between the condition of material deprivation and the identification of people as poor according to ideological representations of poor people as passive, different and helpless. More inclusive notions of poverty on the other hand, describe poverty in much more relative terms with no clear dividing line between 'the poor' and the non-poor. Poverty is established on the basis of people's relative position, opportunities and living conditions and not by reference to the characteristics of poor people.

As we saw, some activists described poverty in the locality by identifying particular individuals and groups as poor on the basis of their dependence on benefits and the erosion of personal control that this was assumed to entail. What connects this with the former image of poor people as starving and destitute is that in each case 'the poor' are identified as a separate social category outside of or cut off from the rest of society. Poverty is employed in a way that connects particular social and material conditions of poverty with an image of poor people as helpless and dependent. In all cases, 'the poor' are distinguished by their inability to act as subjects. They are constructed through their social difference, inferior status and dependent position. They are the 'done-to', unable to support themselves or to play a meaningful role in society. It is this aspect of poverty which links images of poor people as the destitute and starving in the 'Third World' with an understanding of poverty that relates to the lives of those who are trapped on benefits.

This relates closely to the conception of poverty as an inability to cope, held by respondents in the last chapter. Both draw on an image of poor people as passive, dependent, helpless and cut-off from the mainstream of society. Among respondents in the last chapter, the dividing line between the poor and non-poor was established

on the basis of material deprivation, (e.g. 'lacking the essentials'), which indicated a condition of helplessness and failure among 'the poor'. For activists in this chapter, it was in terms of their social position and circumstances, rather than their material well-being, that 'the poor' were distinguished from their own lives. In particular, poor people were regarded as those trapped on welfare and dependent on benefits. Poverty was perceived as a permanent condition and frame of mind in which people lost the capacity to improve their own lives and became fixed in poverty. In both cases, it is an 'experience-distant' conception of poverty which is evident, that relates poverty as a condition to other groups of people seen as separate and distant from their own life.

It is interesting to note that among those respondents in the last chapter who strongly denied that they were 'poor', many were in just the position that activists in this chapter associated with a more exclusive conception of poverty. Their exclusion from the labour market and dependence on benefits appeared to place them in the category of poor people, according to the ideas expressed by activists in this chapter. It was in terms of this conception of poverty that those interviewed in the last chapter believed that they were regarded as poor by others. Their denials of poverty, centred on the association between their social circumstances and lack of resources on the one hand and the experience of hopelessness, dependence, non-agency and exclusion on the other. In resisting the suggestion that their behaviour was determined by their circumstances, these respondents presented themselves as active, respectable, optimistic, able to manage and committed to social values and norms. At the same time, it was apparent that in describing other people as poor, they drew upon the very same notions of poor people (as passive, different and unable to cope) that they rejected in their own case.

A more inclusive and 'experience-near' conception of poverty was detected when activists spoke of poverty as a general issue and as a condition affecting people as a whole in the locality. Poverty in this case referred to the conditions of low wages, structured disadvantage and lack of resources faced by many, without identifying these individuals as poor, in the sense of constituting some separate social grouping. Poverty was not defined as a condition of personal inadequacy, incapacity or hopelessness, associated with benefit dependence and reliance on inadequate social provision. Instead, it linked people's experience of material shortage, insecurity and precariousness with forms of self-reliance, community action and mutual aid developed within working-class communities. Like respondents in the last chapter,

activists distanced themselves from the dependence and passivity associated with 'poor people'. They did so by emphasising the active resistance to poverty among local people. It was through demonstrating their continued ability to struggle and fight against the difficulties that they experienced that people confirmed their identity as competent and respectable members of society.

If we return for a moment to the two-dimensional typology of activists' views illustrated earlier in the chapter, we can show an association between the various perspectives on local issues and problems that were identified and the adoption of particular conceptions of poverty. Exclusive conceptions of poverty were more commonly found in the accounts of activists whose analysis of local issues and problems reflected a personal or community perspective. These accounts placed greater emphasis on the personal dimensions of people's lives in a way that distinguished between the speaker's own circumstances and responses and those of other people. As a result, there was a much greater concentration on the personal and subjective aspects of poverty by which poor people were distinguished and separated from others in the area. It was among those who adopted a more structural or professional discourse in relation to local issues that more inclusive conceptions of poverty were found which focused on the relative deprivation of local people.

However, the overall picture was not quite as simple as this formulation suggests. In some accounts, both conceptions of poverty were employed. Some activists referred to an exclusive conception of poverty in describing other people as poor but adopted a more inclusive understanding of poverty when the object of discussion was their own lives. What was interesting about this was that in both cases, the use of the term poverty appeared to convey certain meanings about the condition of material and social deprivation. Hostility to the idea that local people were poor, was based on a sense that poverty implied a particular identity and subjectivity as poor people. In particular, poor people were constructed as passive, inadequate and dependent. A similar relationship between material conditions and social identity was also apparent in the use of a more inclusive conception of poverty. However, in this case, the experience of material deprivation was linked to an identity and subjectivity based on positive and constructive qualities.

Thus underlying both conceptions of poverty was an implicit understanding that poverty constituted a threat to people's self-image and identity, their sense of worth and dignity and their ability to fulfil social roles and norms of behaviour. In this

respect, they drew on a normative framework in which 'the poor' were seen to fall short as adequate and worthy members of society, on account of their social or material circumstances. The attempt to distance themselves from more exclusive conceptions of poverty (in which the poor were identified as passive victims and welfare cases, overwhelmed by social and personal problems and denied a role as subjects capable of shaping their own future), was essential to the maintenance of a positive identity. The stress on inclusive conceptions of poverty, which emphasised the self-reliance and coping abilities of local people was, in a similar way, a response to the need for an acceptable identity and sense of community membership.

Poverty, identity and the community

This association between conceptions of poverty and questions of identity becomes clear when we look at community activists' statements concerning the relationship between poverty and the local community. A significant theme which emerges in a number of their accounts is the forceful rejection of the characterisation of the area as poor. This was not so much a denial of the existence of poverty in the area or of the real difficulties and stresses experienced by many families struggling to make ends meet. It was, instead, the rejection of a label which appeared to assign an inferior status and social position to local residents. In the opinion of local activists, it conveyed an impression of local people as uniformly dependent, disadvantaged and overwhelmed by personal and social problems. It therefore categorised people in a way that took no account of the range of circumstances and needs among individuals and groups in the area. The following extract typically expresses local activists' views on this issue:

> I think there's a lot of good in Milton. It's got a bad press. It always sickens me when people talk about, and we've done it here, talk about poor people. I live in the area and I don't consider myself disadvantaged. If you think of people and they say it's a poor area and dismiss it, then in that respect, it annoys me. There's a lot of good in the area. There is pockets of [negative] things that are happening, but you could have that anywhere. If people actually took time to look at the area they'd see there is positive action coming out of it and I feel that's something we should be promoting. (Sally)

The meaning of poverty revealed in such comments is one that concentrates on the negative and stigmatising aspects of the term. This activist believed that local

residents were assigned a particular social identity as poor people which then constructed other people's attitudes towards them. Identified as poor, they were differentiated from other people in terms of their values, behaviour and ability. Poverty was then perceived as the product of a certain social environment which shaped people's thinking and actions in negative ways and locked them into destructive patterns of behaviour. Categorising local people as poor implied that their actions and choices were somehow determined by their status and position as poor people.

> So don't blame it just on poverty that is making kids get pregnant. Maybe it does contribute a certain amount but not just that. And I hate it because... I've got one friend in particular that lives in Glenside and she got a visit from somebody from the housing. And the chap came in and says "You've got a beautiful home, what you doing living in Glenside?" So if you live in Glenside you're not allowed to have a nice house. That's what it sounded like...meaning that if you live in Glenside you've to be living like shit. (Marion)

The identification of the local area as poor also served to fix local people in a relationship of dependence and subordination with the rest of society. It detached the problems and experiences of local people from society as a whole by constructing them as an especially inadequate group, without agency, motivation and capability. They were no longer identified as working-class people but confined to a separate social and cultural world in which they lacked social worth or respect in the eyes of other people. Poverty therefore implied a position of permanent social exclusion which offered no prospect of change.

> As I say, the area is not heaven on earth, but it's not hell on earth...that's what the Sun said about us. [...] If you're in a poverty-stricken area, you're written off, you don't have that respectability associated with areas perceived as working-class. You've now got new terms like the underclass that they use for people who are seen as even below poverty, further down the line. (Margaret)

In this extract, we can see the influence of various ideas and discourses concerning the existence of an 'underclass'. As we saw in chapter 2, these ideas have been directed in particular at the residents of deprived housing schemes who are described in terms of their limited employment opportunities, low stake in society and long-term dependence on welfare benefits. Like earlier 'culture of poverty' theories, the

notion of an underclass can combine a structural analysis of poverty, which acknowledges the importance of recent social, demographic and economic changes, with a concentration on the cultural attitudes and values of those 'trapped' in poverty. A secondary effect is to assign a distinct identity, social position and status to those excluded from the labour force and living in deprived areas. Its significance for activists is that residents are identified as belonging to a separate social world where they are seen to lack respectability and worth, the capacity to fulfil accepted social roles and the ability to overcome their dependent status.

It was this image of poor people as passive, dependent and separate from others, that local activists rejected in their accounts. Their responses followed the same pattern of denial, dissociation and redefinition found in the accounts of respondents in the previous chapter. In these earlier interviews, most of those interviewed denied that they were poor because they did not identify their own lives in terms of the images of passivity, non-agency and helplessness that they associated with 'the poor'. Dissociation took the form of emphasising their relatively well-off position and greater coping ability compared to others they regarded as poor. In some cases, respondents indicated that they were poor in terms of a definition of poverty which focused on the constraints on their access to resources. But they did so in ways which related poverty to particular circumstances, without identifying themselves personally as poor, in the sense described above.

Similar responses were found among community activists, ranging from the denial of poverty to positive assertions of well-being and the construction of alternative definitions of poverty. Activists who adopted a 'professional' perspective were particularly vociferous in their denials of poverty. They strongly resisted statements which identified local people as a cohesive group and assigned them a separate identity and subjectivity as poor people. They acknowledged the poor conditions, low living standards, lack of resources and inadequate social provision for many groups. But poverty was perceived as something more - a category of exclusion in which poor people were negatively identified, excluded and 'written-off' by other people. Their own accounts emphasised the specific unmet needs of particular sections of the local population, their lack of material resources and the gaps in existing provision. This distinction between material hardship on the one hand and poverty (implying difference and segregation from other people) on the other, is clear in the following extract:

> Some people in the area feel that they hate to be stigmatised, like this is a poverty area. I know that there are a lot of people in the area feel that. But there is definitely hardship in the area. Also a group of people that have nae really been identified are people that are slightly above the normal level of benefits. A lot of the people that are working are not in particularly highly-paid jobs and they're struggling to make ends meet. But they dinnie get the benefits and the state handouts, if you like, because they are actually in employment. That's a very silent... it's not a vocal group at all. They're very reticent about coming forward about something like that. But a lot of people when they hear about the poverty schemes and that, say well what about us, we're working... struggling to pay a mortgage and stuff like that. I mean there's quite high levels of council house buying in the area... and I think that some of these people are feeling the pinch. [...] So it's not exactly an affluent area, but you wouldn't really define that as poverty. The lack of prospects for a lot of people covers just about the whole social spectrum now, but that's not really poverty as such. (Graham)

Among community activists who held a more structural view of local issues and problems, the existence of poverty was not denied. But it was redefined by reference to a more inclusive conception of poverty. The identification of local people as poor was seen as compatible with the possession of coping skills and abilities. Poverty was seen to exist in the area as a condition of relative deprivation and structural disadvantage. But these activists stressed the positive and constructive responses of local people, their active participation in the community, their self-respect and commitment to social values and norms. In this way, they described the experience of poverty in the locality in a way that resisted more negative conceptions of local people as passive victims of processes beyond their control. Instead, the experience of poverty was linked to a positive conception of the local community as the basis of a positive identity and sense of membership. As one activist explained:

> We have got the advantage of... where... in an area like this people have had to live on an income at the bread-line. So if they do better themselves, well and good. But people who have had it good all their lives, suddenly, the way things are going, they're being hit, they're having to tighten their purse strings... people who've never had to worry about a penny in their lives. They're actually... I feel more sorry for them because they don't know how to cope with that. [...] Here there are a lot of community resources and people can turn to each other. (Margaret)

This more inclusive meaning of poverty referred to a measure of constrained agency without implying the total removal of agency. This use of poverty served to locate problems and issues in the area within a particular moral framework that highlighted the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources in society. The area was distinctive only in terms of the low resources of its inhabitants and the cumulative effects of past failures to address the needs of the area, which had resulted in greater need and worse conditions. Poverty was therefore employed in a strategic way, to assert a claim for extra resources and social provision in the area in order to ease the deprivation and hardship faced by local residents. It was defined not as a category of exclusion but as a category of need denoting unacceptable conditions and a lack of resources.

In some accounts, it was apparent that different meanings of poverty were applied when talking of the community as a whole and about certain sections of the local population identified as poor. Activists who adopted a 'community' perspective identified poverty as a condition of benefit dependence, alienation and exclusion among the long-term unemployed and single-parent families in the area. In this case, the defining feature of poverty was the passiveness and weakness associated with 'the poor'. But they also referred to local people as poor in a more general and inclusive sense which directed attention to their relative deprivation and lack of opportunities. In these terms, poverty existed in the area, but its causes lay outside of the area and beyond the control of local people.

Poverty was therefore perceived both as a category denoting need and a category of exclusion, which located certain kinds of behaviour, problems and social conditions among people seen to constitute a separate social category. Activists sometimes employed the term as a means of directing attention to the level of need in the local community; but they also perceived that the status of local residents as respectable and capable members of society was called into question by the use of the term. This gave rise to a series of dilemmas for local activists in voicing the problems and issues faced by local people. The notion of poverty served to highlight the problems and needs of people in the area. But at the same time, it reduced local residents to the status of 'poor people'. To what extent was it possible to challenge and alter the popular perception and status of the area as a poverty area without undermining the claim for extra resources to meet the needs of people in the area?

In attempting to resolve this dilemma, two distinct responses were found among community activists. Some activists emphasised the distinctiveness of the community in terms of the level of need in the area and the necessity of providing greater resources and social provision. In so doing, they attempted to challenge the particular social meanings attached to poverty in terms of which local people were assigned an inferior and dependent status through their distinctive identity as poor people. For these activists, it was imperative to distinguish and detach these two meanings of poverty. Some activists, however, were more inclined to blur the boundaries between the local community and other areas in order to reduce the impression that local people were locked in a separate world of hopelessness, dependence and inaction. The designation of the area as 'poor' reinforced both the stigma and unequal treatment faced by local residents and popular perceptions regarding the personal and moral inadequacy of people in these areas. Consequently, these activists tend to play down the existence of poverty in the area.

In this respect we can see a parallel between the accounts of local activists in this chapter and those of respondents in the last chapter. The desire to establish an acceptable identity was apparent in the accounts of local activists discussing the community and in the self-presentations of individuals talking about their own personal lives. In both cases, it appeared that subjects had internalised negative ideas about what it meant to be poor. Thus, respondents in the last chapter emphasised their positive outlook, their sense of control over their lives and their ability to overcome problems and difficulties. Local activists drew attention to the agency, resourcefulness and capability displayed by local people in managing their lives. In both cases, the assertion of these positive attributes was in marked contrast to the characteristics associated with poor people - passivity, demoralisation and exclusion.

At the heart of these narratives was the struggle for social inclusion, dignity and respect in a context in which local residents believed they were set apart by their residence in an area seen as poor and deprived. This struggle centred on the construction of identity at the level of the local community and the social meanings attached to poverty and being poor. It took the form of a resistance to being identified as poor by reference to an exclusive conception of poverty, which separated and branded the community as passive, helpless and dependent. But it was also apparent in the attempt to formulate a more inclusive discourse on poverty which linked the condition of relative deprivation with cultural values and qualities of resourcefulness, pride and self-reliance among local people. In both cases, it was

the construction of an acceptable identity and self-image in a context of poverty and deprivation that was at stake. It is in this context that I consider the role of community projects and initiatives in the following chapter.

Conclusion

For local activists interviewed in this study, the notion of poverty was problematic where it was seen to identify the community as a whole. The main reason for this was the sense that describing people's social or material circumstances as poor identified them as different from other people; not only that, this difference was interpreted as a matter of personal capability, social standing and moral adequacy. In this respect, the accounts of local community activists in this chapter contained many of the same themes and meanings found in the accounts of respondents in the last chapter, when relating their personal experience and understanding of poverty. In particular, there emerged a similar concern with questions of identity and agency as important aspects of what it meant to be poor and a certain tension which derived from the apprehension of poverty both as a category denoting need and as a category of exclusion.

Two distinct conceptions of poverty emerged in this chapter. An 'experience-distant' conception was apparent when activists spoke of other people at a distance from their own lives. Poverty was taken to refer to a distinct category of poor people, separate from the rest of the population. This conception linked the social and material circumstances of those in poverty with forms of identity and subjectivity as poor people. 'The poor' were identified by their passivity, weakness and dependence, which appeared to give them the characteristics of a permanent category of poor people associated with and increasingly concentrated in 'poverty areas'. They were constituted as a separate social category defined by their need, their inability to support themselves and their families, their inferior life-style and living conditions and their different attitudes and behaviour. Thus poverty was constituted as a category of exclusion and subjection.

A quite different conception was apparent when community activists spoke of poverty in an inclusive sense. Poverty was understood as a condition of financial precariousness and relative deprivation brought about by social and economic forces which disadvantaged people in terms of their material and social circumstances,

access to resources, employment status and opportunities and family life. This 'experience-near' conception referred to social conditions and processes which affected the lives of many ordinary people rather than a state confined to a separate social category of poor people. No clear line was established between the poor and non-poor. Those facing poverty were not passive victims but actively engaged in measures which helped them overcome threats to their dignity, self-esteem and agency. In this way, local activists distanced themselves from the stigma and demoralisation associated with others identified as poor and destitute. They frequently drew upon an identity as members of a working-class community, committed to traditional values of hard work, self-reliance and mutual aid.

Consequently, the major emphasis in their accounts was on the positive and constructive responses of local people, their active participation in the community and their respectability and commitment to social values and norms. This provided a basis for the construction of a positive identity through emphasising the role of the community in increasing people's ability to cope with and overcome the social circumstances and disadvantages that they experienced. At the same time, these activists challenged conceptions of poverty which reduced local people to a separate and subordinate social position as 'poor people' characterised by dependence and demoralisation. In both these ways, they attempted to meet the need for an acceptable identity and community membership. As I shall show in the following chapter, community-based activity can also be seen as a form of identity-constructing activity which is undertaken in the light of people's understanding of what it means to be poor.

Chapter 6. Community-based activity and the experience of poverty

Introduction

One of the main objectives in interviewing local community activists in the second stage of this study was to gain an insight into the significance of the community as a mediating structure between individual experience on the one hand and the social meanings relating to poverty on the other. In the last chapter it became clear that for many activists, the local community was associated with a negative and stigmatising identity denoting low status, social failure and dependence. But it was also apparent that in some cases, activists held a view of the community which highlighted its positive impact on people's lives, their self-perceptions, social relationships and coping skills. This more positive view of the community was also found among respondents in the first set of interviews, some of whom described how their contact with particular community groups had transformed their outlook, self-belief and sense of control over their lives.

There were a great many local community organisations and projects in the area which had been set up, at least in part, as a response to the area's status as a place of poverty and disadvantage, beset by social problems and difficulties. One could therefore be forgiven for thinking that community-based activity was perceived as a means of addressing poverty at the local level, if not by local people, then by those who supported and funded various initiatives in the area. Presumably, if such projects did not contribute to a reduction in poverty they were at least expected to improve people's capacity to cope with conditions of poverty. It is the relationship between poverty and community-based action which is of interest in this chapter and in particular, the impact of the latter on the experience of poverty.

My concern throughout this thesis has been with the subjective experience and meaning of poverty for local residents and its impact on people's identity, social relations and sense of agency. And so it is in terms of the meanings and understandings perceived by local residents that I explore the relationship between community activity and poverty, rather than by reference to more objective measures of poverty or deprivation in the area. My concern is with how community-based

activity mediates the experience of poverty and responses to material deprivation, rather than its effect on alleviating poverty defined solely as a material condition. Of particular interest is the way in which community organisations meet the need for an acceptable identity and a sense of social inclusion in a context where the meanings of poverty applied to local residents emphasise their difference and their inadequacy.

Most of the activists I spoke to did not describe their involvement in local groups and activities as explicitly concerned with reducing or alleviating poverty. Instead, their accounts focused on the role of community activity primarily in terms of providing a useful or valuable service, fighting for improved facilities, or as a socially rewarding activity. However, most of those activists recognised the importance of poverty as part of the discursive and social context in which their activity was undertaken and perceived by other people. The existence of a high profile poverty programme in the area, the number of local community initiatives, high levels of unemployment and deprivation and a reputation for social problems all related to the area's status as a poor area, whether this designation was accepted by local activists or not. So while activists did not involve themselves in community activity with the express purpose of reducing or relieving poverty, and often expressed scepticism about the impact on poverty, it was clear that their understanding of community activity was shaped by the social meanings of poverty articulated by activists in the last chapter.

My aim in the first part of this chapter is to explore the particular conceptions of community held by activists in order to understand the main ideas and assumptions underlying their accounts of community action. It is on the basis of quite different assumptions about the meaning of community that local activists construct various rationales and strategies for community activity. I shall endeavour to show that community-based activity is directed at improving the welfare and quality of life of local residents (providing opportunities, services, advice and mutual support) but is also concerned with upholding a sense of dignity and self-reliance. In this sense, community-based activity can be regarded as 'identity-constructing' activity which aims to generate a positive sense of identity among local people through the activities it promotes. In the context of the negative social meanings perceived by local activists, its impact on the experience of poverty may be that it proposes an alternative interpretation of local people's social position and circumstances which does not assign to them the status of 'poor people'.

Conceptions of community

In the last chapter I documented a number of distinct approaches to local issues and problems found in the accounts of community activists. I identified four contrasting perspectives among community activists which I described as:

- a personal perspective which drew largely on anecdotal experience and involvement in a narrow range of groups or activities and considered local issues in terms of their impact and consequences at a personal level;
- a professional perspective which focused in a more detached way on the specific needs of particular groups within the area and on providing various kinds of services and facilities in the locality;
- a community perspective which placed emphasis on the role of local groups and activities and the threats to community posed by high unemployment and increasing professionalism of local services;
- a political perspective which focused on the structural nature of the relative deprivation and disadvantage faced by local people.

I noted two key areas of difference underlying these perspectives. The first concerned the style and focus of people's accounts. Some activists focused on the way in which local people experienced the effects of local conditions and particular circumstances on their personal lives and feelings. Other activists took a more detached approach which emphasised the nature and causes of people's social position and circumstances. A second area of difference between activists concerned the range and scope of their accounts. Some were more narrow in their concerns, focusing on the specific interests and needs of particular sections of the local community, while others took a more comprehensive view which considered the wider issues affecting the community. This latter distinction is of particular interest because it gives rise to two quite different conceptions of community.

In the first case, associated with a personal and professional perspective, was a fairly weak conception of community. The community referred simply to the local population of the area with no claims being made about the relationship or interaction between people. According to this view, most people had little sense of community, did not perceive the community as a vehicle for meeting their needs and aspirations and defined their interests in largely personal terms rather than in relation

to the community. Instead a diverse range of interests and groups was perceived. By contrast, the second more comprehensive view of community was based on the assertion of common interests and concerns among local residents. The importance assigned to the community was underlined by the belief that local people's interests and welfare were bound up with the local community and the collective activity and involvement of people in local organisations.

These two conceptions of community, one emphasising the significance of community in local people's lives and the other implying only a very weak identification with the community, were based on three main areas of divergence. The first concerned the question of whether there existed a strong sense of local solidarity and common identity among residents on account of conditions and circumstances that they shared in common. A second difference related to the degree of community attachment and identification assumed by activists and the level of informal help, mutual support and autonomous organisation engaged in by local people. A third difference concerned local activists' views about the extent to which local people were actually willing to get involved in community activity and the importance placed upon maximising local participation as an objective of community activity. I look at each of these in turn.

1. Common interests v diversity

A first point of difference in activists' conceptions of community concerned the extent to which local residents were seen as sharing a common sense of their interests and their identity. As we saw in the last chapter, some activists stressed the diversity of people's circumstances and needs in the area and suggested that local residents did not identify with the community as a whole .

> It's classed as the Royston Park but nobody classes the whole area as Royston Park, it's all separate areas. (Jill)

> The idea of a sense of community based around Royston Park is a bit of a myth. (Graham)

> You could see the community as like a family because you have these different interests and conflicts between the members of the family. (Norma)

The emphasis given to the range of diverse and conflicting interest groups in the locality suggested that these activists held a very limited notion of community. A series of divisions were created between council tenants and private house owners; respectable community members and trouble-makers; households in employment and those on benefits; long-term residents and incomers; better-off neighbourhoods and problem areas. This sense of fragmentation meant that these community activists defined their role in parochial terms and prioritised the specific interests of particular groups over the general interests of 'the community'. These activists dismissed the idea that one could represent the community, which implied a uniform body holding a single shared set of interests and goals. The reality, they believed, was a fragmented community made up of particular social groups or neighbourhoods, each having their own separate views, needs and interests. They saw their own loyalties in terms of their neighbourhoods in which they lived or the particular social groups, such as young mothers or pensioners, whose interests they were paid to represent.

> It's difficult... we attend these meetings but you're not really representative of the Craiglea area. I mean you can express your own views... I find a slight difficulty when I represent Craiglea on the Urban Panel because in theory I'm speaking for Craiglea, but I know within myself that I'm not. I'm really speaking... unless you're getting people, other people in the area... you're not properly representative. You're a voice for that area, without really knowing what the views of the area really are. It could be that the people in the area don't have a view at all. I still have misgivings about that...voting for something, if it ever came to a vote, that might affect the area... without really knowing what the true feelings of the vast majority of people are. (Graham)

Some activists became narrowly concerned with the particular locality in which they were resident. They pushed for the perceived interests and needs of their own neighbourhood, claiming that it had been neglected in the past compared to other parts which had received the bulk of resources. This view took little account of the value of projects and facilities serving the area as a whole and focused attention purely on those resources allocated for projects in their neighbourhood. In my interviews, it was among those activists living in the more peripheral areas that these feelings were most vividly expressed. This is illustrated in the following discussion with two activists living in Craiglea, a neighbourhood on the edge of the estate.

So you're saying that the issues and concerns in Craiglea are different or separate from those in other parts of Royston Park?

Alan: Well we're not separate, but we still feel cheated out of a neighbourhood centre. Cause the only thing we've got now that we've had to get is a community lounge we've got in the primary school. [...]

But you say you feel cheated?

Alan: Well maybe it is being a bit harsh, right enough. [...]But I feel compared to what other groups, other things they've built in the area, percentage-wise, there's been nothing. Ken, taking the size of the area of Craiglea and taking the size of Blackmuir and Milton, they've all got maybe one or two community centres, whereas Craiglea's got nothing. And you've got to mind that Craiglea's a big place, there's east and west Craiglea, Tritton comes into it. So if you take it on the map, it's a big, big area. It's like a lot bigger than Blackmuir, on the map, like. But we've got nothing here. And, as I say, the ones that are able to shout the loudest... they're more organised, I must admit... maybe we're more organised now than what we were 4 or 5 years ago... but I feel that there's a definite need for a neighbourhood centre, for all ages, not just for the elderly, but for the young and all. [...] How so much money came in their direction, [i.e. Milton and Blackmuir] is because they were mair organised, I'd say, the people. Without a doubt, they were doing the biggest shouting and they got the biggest amount of cash. People within Craiglea are maybe feeling that the way in which these things are perceived is that if there's a problem, it's throw the public money at that and that you have to be bad to get the goodies, so to speak.

Neil: That's right. What I'm saying is that that was because people in the greater area were perceiving it that you had to be... you had to have something, either your housing was substandard or the behaviour of the youngsters... or the crime rate, or something like that. [...]

Would you say then that there is more need, more problems there? Does the fact that more money goes there reflect a greater need?

Alan: It probably reflects... what they've been paying out for years... does reflect what the actual needs are, like. And there's nae disputing that like. But at the same time, we're like... Craiglea would like to be considered for...

Neil: Exactly. They feel they're contributing to public money...I mean they're paying their poll tax and that sort of thing... well the majority are...But one way or another they're contributing to the public purse...

Alan: And there's probably more people living in this area that pay less regards the government coffers, i.e. tax, national insurance, cause they're not working, plus they're

not paying their council tax. So really they're getting maybe a lot more back than what other people from other areas are getting, who are paying their full whack.

Neil: Yes, that's right. It isnae spoken about all that much but that definitely comes into it.

Alan: Kind of getting more, but putting nothing in.

So you're saying that people in Craiglea feel a sense of resentment towards the other areas?

Alan: Well it maybe exists among some of the organisers and that, like. Maybe not the general public.

Neil: They do feel that everything seems to go down the road. That's the general attitude. Down the road means over this area in Blackmuir and Milton.

In this exchange, the speaker refers to community-based activity principally as a means of meeting the demand for local services in particular localities rather than addressing poverty, social problems and disadvantage in the area. This lack of commitment to wider interests or concerns was apparent among other community activists whose involvement was confined to particular sections of the local population. One activist who worked with a local elderly project felt that it was important that her work spanned the whole area. And yet she could see little value in having area-wide organisations to represent the interests of the community. They did not, in her view, sufficiently address the needs of elderly people. She stopped attending meetings of the local Anti-Poverty Forum having concluded that they did not have anything to offer her own particular group.

In contrast to this perspective, a much more positive conception of community was articulated by some activists, based on the perception of a collective consciousness and sense of common interests among local people. This view placed its emphasis on commonality and inclusion as opposed to specificity and difference. These activists did not deny the existence of a range of competing interest groups in the area, but they believed that despite their differences, local neighbourhoods and groups shared interests in common which gave them sufficient reason to act as a single interest group. This view was closely associated with activists who were both long-term residents of the area and expressed a strong degree of attachment to the area.

Thirty years ago when I first came here it was a good community. Everybody helped everybody else, all over. We all mixed. Even the kids... from all over, from Blackmuir and... well to start with those houses werenae there and the Glenside houses werenae

there when I first came, but we all played together. Nobody ever thought it was segregated, like nowadays they do. Like the kids they all get into gangs like the Blackmuir against the Milton. But there was none of that when we were young.

So among some people at least, there's a strong feeling that the community is Royston Park as a whole, not the...

Yeah, not just your individual areas. There's a lot of people that feel it should be one big community rather than all different ones. But as you say, there is a lot of them that want to belong to their own part and nowhere else. (Marion)

There was some acknowledgement that people tended to identify more closely with their own neighbourhood and that the concerns and needs were different in each. But this was complemented by a belief that the best way forward was through a joint approach to planning which encouraged, where possible, the development of projects serving the area as a whole. In this respect, there was a concern that some neighbourhoods had started to act alone in attempting to negotiate funding for their own projects and initiatives.

That's what annoys me sometimes about other projects, in a way, like if they're in Glenside or something, they class that as their community and nothing else. But it's not. Their community is Royston Park whether they live in Glenside, Blackmuir or Craiglea... they shouldn't call that their own community. [...] I had an argument with someone the other day. They were going on about your community. But I was saying that I could be like that as well. Like they were saying you're just going to serve Milton and no one else. But the idea of the project is to serve the Royston Park area and that's what I want to do And that's what I'm gonna do. Or I could be like oh I'm not going into Blackmuir and Glenside. (Moira)

An important priority was to set up and promote community-wide organisations which would bring together individuals and groups from across the whole area in the planning of a common strategy. This would help avoid exacerbating existing divisions which increased the level of social differentiation and status distinction within the area.

I would like to see some kind of forum set up for people who have a vision of what the area could look like. In fact, even if you could get people from the area together for a weekend and work with someone... and go for that ideal. What is everything you would like in this community to make it a good place to live? So you could design what people

think they needed. I think it would be a wonderful exercise. And okay, it might start away up here, and you'd never be able to do that, but if that's the model you've got, even if you come somewhere in the middle, it's bound to be major. We're always trying to get more people involved. Every community group will say to you that they'd like a lot more local people to be involved. I'd still like to see some sort of forum... or a coming together of all the local groups. People that work with children have specific issues about children and things that they would like to see for children. People who work with pensioners have again specific things they would like to see for pensioners. (Pat)

2. A sense of community

A second area of difference among local activists concerned their understanding of the kinds of social relations and forms of solidarity that existed among residents. Some activists believed there existed a strong sense of community among people in the area. These activists stressed the importance of local social relations and informal networks as the basis of a collective consciousness which lay at the heart of community activity. Other activists claimed that the majority of local people felt little sense of community identity or solidarity. They argued that individuals were basically concerned with their own individual status, social position and personal welfare and became involved in community activity only as a means of securing their own personal interests in a direct and tangible way.

In some cases, activists accepted that a much stronger sense of community identity and common interests existed in some neighbourhoods compared to others.

So is there much of a community in Westwood?

I don't think so. Although that doesn't mean to say we're not friendly because we are... I mean people always say hello. But I dinnie think...I don't think there's such a pull together like in Milton or Blackmuir.

You mean no real sense of shared interests and of fighting to change things?

Yes. I think you're right. I've just found that there's not much of a pull, if you like, of people. (Cathy)

This lack of a 'pull' was often associated with the development of more privatised lifestyles and material concerns.

There's no sense of community here at all... not in this bought... sort of area where you're buying your houses. Everybody seems to be work, holiday and cars... that's the impression I get. [...]

Is there much identification with the area of Royston Park as a whole then?

I couldn't really speak for everybody in the area because... a lot of people in the area you dinnie get to know ... because they're working. You see there's a different sort of set up as well. If they're working, they've got cars... you never sort of get the chance to... You don't have a lot of contact with people here... unless you actually know them, unless you knew them from years ago. Even then they're busy with their working, they're gardening and different things as well as doing their houses. I don't think it's the same sort of community. (Eve)

Some believed that a sense of community survived only in those places where shared problems and poor conditions had generated a strong sense of collective interest as the basis of community organisation and struggle. Others, however, claimed that one of the major problems affecting the more stigmatised and less desirable neighbourhoods was the breakdown in community leading to mistrust, fear and insecurity among residents. These activists sometimes spoke of the need to re-establish a sense of community spirit in these areas. The provision of new community-based amenities and improved housing would, they hoped, generate a sense of pride and a more positive morale in the area.

Those activists who believed that a strong sense of community identification and common interests existed among local people also believed that the development of local services and amenities had helped encourage a sense of pride in the community. This perspective was most commonly articulated by those who had lived on the estate for a long period of time. They saw the origins of community as rooted in the informal associations and networks established in the early years after the estate was built. These later gave rise to more formal and established community groups. They claimed that many local organisations had their roots in social groups and informal activities initiated by local people as they attempted to meet needs and respond to conditions that they shared in common.

And where did that community spirit come from?

Well, after the war they built the prefabs at Blackmuir and my mum got one. And then they started to build all the houses because the prefabs were only temporary housing. So they started building The Drive and it was all the same people who got moved in from

the prefabs. The young ones of those families started getting all the other new houses they built after that, when they were married. So everybody sort of knew each other and I don't know if that was the reason...there was always this community spirit that was there. And when we started the Beachcombers everyone was behind us saying oh yes, go ahead. There was never anyone trying to put you down and saying, oh you'll never do it.

And that's always been there, before all the projects that came along?

Oh aye, that is how all these things began to come up, because of the community spirit and people wanting to do things. And they turned into projects... people getting an idea, and they did this and this, maybe applied to get a grant from somewhere...getting a wee grant to start off and then it all escalated, you know, and you got all these big urban aid funded places. I mean that all started off just fae an idea in a community activist's head. (Lorna)

Some of these activists feared that the old sense of community and the informal networks that had sustained it were now on the decline. People had moved away to be replaced by new residents who did not share the same sense of identification or motivation to get involved, or found it difficult to gain acceptance within these established associations.

A lot of the older people will complain that the community is not what it used to be, but there's also a lot of older ones still working in the community. There's not a lot of community now... It's like the tide, it comes in and out. [...] But you see people years ago... people didn't have a lot of things, they didn't have a lot of material things. You were lucky if 1 in 20 people had a car. And television was a new invention as far as we were concerned. [...] People aren't community-minded like before because years ago a lot of them were... mums were at home. But nowadays mums are having to work so therefore with the new influx of the bought houses, the selling off of the houses, and the new people are material minded. They want to see how many cars they have, how many thick-pile carpets they...all the different things and that. And there's more having to work... maybe a lot of them are having to work but they'd maybe like to be like us. (Irene)

In some cases, they saw the decline in community spirit as part of a more general trend which was related to improvements in people's material circumstances. As they became more financially secure, people no longer felt the same degree of attachment to the community and became more individualistic in their concerns. In

this sense, age was seen as a factor, with a difference in the generations in their attitudes to community. Many young people identified more with cultural symbols of success, achievement and status, rather than forms of community support and mutual help.

> Folk can be very supportive. But then a lot of the young ones don't want it as well. A lot of kids want to be really independent and get on with it themselves. At the end of the day they perhaps really do want help but they don't want to ask for it. And there is a lot of help in the community. (Marion)

The decline in 'traditional' forms of community alongside improvements in people's material circumstances meant that there no longer existed the same 'natural' base for community activity and organisation among local people. Nevertheless, some activists argued that it was possible to construct a renewed sense of community identity through encouraging forms of collective action around contemporary issues affecting local residents.

> Here the population has fluctuated and changed so much, that the amount of people in Blackmuir, in particular, that have been here since it was built... there's not a lot of them.
> *So the community is not just there, but has to be developed?*
> It's not there, you have to develop it and keep at it. Once you've done a bit of work you can't sit back and say well we've got it. It's not like that. Sometimes you find that you've taken steps backwards again and ideas that they had years ago are coming up again, because it's a new group of people. (Pat)

These activists were optimistic and encouraged by what they perceived to be an upward trend in community involvement among local residents. They spoke of the emergence of a positive sense of community based on a firm belief in the possibility of changing and improving their circumstances through engagement in joint action at the local level.

> *Is there a community in Blackmuir?*
> Oh yes, without a doubt. In this small area there are a lot of community groups. There's a good community spirit and people in these groups are committed to making the area better. For people to look in at us from the outside and to think that we're all walking around with long faces is just not true. But we've never ever hidden from the problems that we've got. And we've always recognised that there are a lot of problems... but tried

to handle it in a positive way, rather than run away from it. For a period in the late 70s, early 80s, people were wanting out. I would definitely say it's settled a bit and the people who are here are here... a lot of them... because they choose to be and want to do something about it. (Pat)

3. Local services v local control

Different perceptions of the level of community identification and common interests among residents gave rise to contrasting views on the extent and nature of local people's involvement and participation in community activity. Some activists presented themselves as members of a small, overstretched minority who were largely responsible for ensuring that local groups and activities took place. They saw little basis for community solidarity and shared interests among local people and argued that it was difficult to whip up enthusiasm and get people involved.

No, the thing with this area is trying to get people in, it's like trying to draw blood out of a stone. Surveys show that over the years there's been less unemployment in Westwood than there is in Milton and Blackmuir. [...] But it's trying to get the people down here to get off up their bums and get involved. The biggest problem here is that the ones that were at the meetings like myself are all community activists, are all really busy because we work part-time, all over the place, irregular hours with our wee jobs because we've not got full-time work, so you can't afford to go onto committees cause you can't make the meetings or give it a hundred percent. So they should be targeting it at members of the public trying to get some of them involved, but obviously that's a big job in itself. (Jill)

As a result, the resources and skills of professional workers were seen as critical to the success of local community groups and campaigns.

It's not so much that we want to be able to shift the work on to a paid worker, but if we had a group of people to share out the tasks... but people are finding they don't really have the time and after tasks have been allocated you find they haven't been done, which is frustrating. Then people start to get hacked off and nothing gets done. This years community council annual report will, I think, be like last years, a fairly depressing document. The problems highlighted then are still there now - lack of involvement, lack

of motivation with some people. And working as I do, there's only so much I can do. (Graham)

The fundamental premise of these activists was that community activity was undertaken by only a small minority of local people. Most people, they believed, were just not interested in becoming active in community organisations or getting involved in local forums or planning meetings.

> I think there'll always be this argument about community involvement because what you have to remember is that people that want to become involved in the community will and people that dinnie, dinnie, and they'll never want to be. Like my husband'll never ever... and there's thousands of them like him out there. He couldn't care a shit about the Partnership, or any other organisation, except mine, because it's paying the wages. But otherwise he wouldnae care.[...] And I think that's the problem... there's thousands of Brians... there's probably more Brians than there is me or Pat or Irenes... and they honestly dinnie care a fuck. (Norma)

Thus, one of the main problems identified by these activists was how to engage the majority of people who had no contact with community organisations and to inform them of local developments and the availability of local services. These activists talked constantly of the need to 'reach' the community in order to increase people's awareness of the services provided by local groups and organisations, whether a support group for single-parent mothers or a local fruit and vegetable co-operative.

> When people see something concrete happening, that is when they want to get involved. And I mean quite rightly so because there's nothing worse than having to go along to dreary meetings for months and months and sometimes years, and going along and hearing the same things week in and week out and nothing happening. It can become very tedious and boring. When you've got someone standing on a platform speaking down to you and ye dinnie understand a word they're saying, then what's the point anyway. (Cathy)

One argument for the employment of paid workers was that they could help to stimulate interest and involvement among a wider group of people and so ease the pressure on existing activists who struggled to keep community groups and activities running. Professional workers acting in a community development role could help stimulate local activity as well as identify unmet needs in the locality.

It would probably be good if they could afford to put a worker in the area, to develop the potential of the area and stimulate activity among those not presently involved. It's having somebody to bring these people out, identify them and help them. It probably would be a good idea. Even if they find that the people in the area are quite happy and didn't have any problems...it wouldn't be time wasted, the worker could go on somewhere else. (Graham)

Some activists admitted that without the encouragement, skills and resources provided by professional workers, many of the groups or campaigns in which they had been involved would not have got off the ground.

So you think having a paid worker was critical for the success of that group?
Yes, definitely. For things like the visits and the trips and... when you come along to a group for the very first time you wouldnae know where to start. But if you've got someone who is trained and qualified they can say I can help make this work but you've got to help me do it though, but I've got the organisational skills to help you do it, then I think you do need to have that. It's like you're buying in [the community worker's] skills, what she's doing is passing on her experiences and skills to the local women. These women now have got a lot of these skills. When they first started they were maybe very shy or lacking in confidence. [...] Some of them had been involved in groups before but some hadn't. And when you see the difference that's taken place in 2 years, it's a complete change. Now they can actually deal with councillors and people in authority, they just go right in and do it and knowing that if they've got a problem they'll get it sorted out. Whereas maybe a couple of years ago they would have been like, oh no, I cannae do that, you'll need to do that for me Cathy. So it's about passing on your skills to them. So I think a paid worker is a great asset. (Cathy)

And who has helped support you and back you through all this?
[The Community Education worker] helped us a lot. He's helped us to get this far and he's still helping us. I don't think we could have done everything without that help. He helped us all to get together and he's said you can do this, if you can put your minds to it you can get this done. And I think that's how we've really stuck together and we've done it. (Alison)

This was linked to a more general belief among these activists in the importance of securing adequate funding and resources to enable community groups to run a proper

and efficient service. They did not believe that local people's own priorities and interests were significantly undermined when outside professional workers were employed or sat on the management committees of local projects.

> The credit union should run with volunteers, but it's difficult to get the people to give up... quite a lot of time, to run a credit union, cause it is a business. Lots of little things weren't getting done which was frustrating both the volunteers and the members, so the worker has been of great help. We feel the credit union can't grow any more unless we have premises of our own. At the present collection points we use other group's premises. [...] And we just feel that the credit union can't grow any more in membership or assets until we have our premises.
>
> *How will it change things having paid workers?*
>
> I think it will get a lot more done, rather than them take over, cause the volunteers are stretched being involved in so many groups and most of them work full-time. Hopefully the workers will be able to get other people involved, which will release some of the volunteers to do other things and help bring new ideas in as well. But local people will still be effectively running things and have control. (Helen)

In the opinion of these respondents, securing an adequate level of resources to run a successful and efficient service, which would be of direct and tangible benefit to local people, was of greater importance than cultivating a strong sense of local control and autonomy through community organisations. Without paid staff, many local groups and projects, reliant on local voluntary effort alone, struggled just to tick over and could not hope to extend their activities. One activist ventured the opinion that giving too much power and control to local people was actually a bad thing as it gave rise to resentment and inter-personal disputes.

> I've seen management committees from both sides, I work for a committee and I've been on thousands. I don't think they should have the power to hire and fire as I've seen people fired as a result of vendettas. Local people shouldn't have that power because of the personalities involved and I'd hate to be under a management committee having [the name of one prominent activist] in it, cause I wouldnae last a week. So it might sound great in theory, giving local people control, but in practice... and so you need a proportion of professional people as they should be above these petty vendettas. (Norma)

Generally, these activists believed that professional intervention did not constitute a threat to local autonomy, but helped increase local resources and power. From this point of view, community activity was regarded as a kind of partnership between locally-based professional workers and a core group of local activists. The latter contributed their knowledge, experience and understanding of the community with the former offering skills, resources, advice and access to funding.

> I think we need professionals though. You've got to have a mix. You need people who know what to do. Like if you know about children, then that's what your training is, and that's important. And you need people that can actually recognise that there's something wrong. Sometimes it's not possible for the ordinary person to know everything. And just the same for the professional, he must miss things. So I think you do need the mix and to borrow from each other. I don't think it should be a case of one or the other. (Sally)

In direct contrast to this view, some activists expressed extreme concern and wariness about the involvement of professionals. For some, the term 'professional' was treated as synonymous with outside interference and control and was used to suggest an alien presence or intrusion in the locality. These activists were concerned that as greater emphasis was placed on achieving more professionally-run services, many local organisations no longer served as the expression of community solidarity and self-reliance.

> They come in and it's "I know what's good for the area, I can do blah, blah, blah." But at the end of the day, at 5 o'clock at night these people go out the area and there's people the like's of Pat, Mary and Susie, to name but a few, have to... we don't have to... we choose to live in the area. So we've to kind of clean up half the mess that's left a lot of people in, especially teenagers. "I know what's good for you. I know exactly how you could better yourself." But what they forget is that if you want to help a youngster that's in problems, you've got to be there, not 24 hours a days, but at least 18 of that 24 hours, so that you're there at the times... and night-times are the times when people are needed. Not your missionary work during the day. It's us who had to go in the middle of the riots in Glenside and calming down things while the Comm Ed worker was sitting in his car. We know what they're going through, etc., but they get idle promises from some people. [...] And yet it's been a training ground for the missionary work. People have seen it and people have got really damn good jobs out of what they've written in the area. Alright, maybe there's a lot of good, but never forget your roots.[...] A lot of them have tried to take over, but there's strong-minded people still in the community able to

> say hold on, we live here so don't tell us what's good for us. [...] Rather than have a paid Comm Ed playscheme worker, we prefer to use our own local resources in the form of local mums and dads. Cause the outsiders come in and theorise. I'm always a bit wary of paid workers coming in. Is it to write on a piece of paper? (Irene)

This allusion to 'missionary work' points to a sense of being colonised and controlled from outside. The speaker stresses the ability of local people to handle their own problems within the community and asserts the superiority of local knowledge and experience in relation to the 'theoretical' knowledge of outsiders. These activists placed a strong emphasis on the importance of local autonomy and self-reliance. There was some concern that projects were set up in the area by outside organisations with little reference to the wishes of local people. In some cases, they argued that it was the dependence on professionals that reduced people's ability to cope, their self-respect and their reliance on traditional means of getting by.

> I have been known to be saying that the worst thing that ever happened to Milton was the Social Work department. People would say I'll get my social worker on to you. But a lot of times, not maybe now, but a lot of times the social worker took their thinking powers away from them, like a lot of other things they've taken away from them. It led to dependence. But now they're having to re-educate themselves to standing on their own feet. Maybe it's me and the way I've been brought up and how they've been brought up to view, to feel and be their own person, have their own identity. But some of these bodies take their thinking powers away from them. So where are they then when they're no longer there? What are these people going to do? Go to voluntary people like us. We won't turn anybody away. It's not the first time we've been called out at 2 and 3.00 o'clock in the morning cause somebody... there's been a flood or something. (Irene)

While some of those interviewed regarded non-local professionals with outright hostility, most took a more moderate view. They accepted that professional workers with particular skills could play an important role in supporting local people's ideas and efforts and were prepared to assess their merits or faults on an individual basis. However, there was wide support for the idea that local residents should be trained to do these jobs in order to minimise the reliance on non-local professionals.

> In my experience there's a lot of professional people in this area who are excellent. What I do object to is professional workers talking for the area. I think their job is to teach people or work with people so they can speak up for themselves. [...] I would like to see

> more local people getting these jobs. But then there has to be some method by which local people, if they're not qualified, are supported while they're doing the job. If it's a job for a year and no local person can do it, then you have to employ someone from outwith the area to do that job. But otherwise, new projects should seek to give local people the opportunity to take on the training and give them the chance of applying for the jobs. In an ideal world I always say that that's what should happen. (Pat)

The issue of local control was of paramount importance for these activists. Their accounts of community activity were dominated by the perceived struggle between local control, self-reliance and autonomy on the one hand and outside interference, dependence and acquiescence on the other. This opposition between locals and outsiders was premised on the assumption of a high degree of homogeneity and common purpose among local residents. Such unity depended upon playing down the significance of sectional interests and oppositions and the differences in people's resources, opportunities and life-styles. It also rested upon a particular construction of local people's identity which emphasised their resourcefulness, their experiential knowledge and their commitment. Those whom they categorised as professionals were, by contrast, defined by the lack of these qualities. (On this point it is perhaps noteworthy that professionals were usually spoken about as 'he' while local activists were referred to as 'she').

> ... professional workers are looked upon quite a lot of the time negatively. Like how can some 21 year old with a degree that lives in Newington... how do they know what problems someone, maybe 30 with a couple of kids living in dire poverty in the middle of Milton... I mean what do they know about it? Absolutely nothing, apart from what they've learnt at college. And it's like what right have they got to come down and tell me what they think is right? And they're sitting there saying oh aye, I can understand, I sympathise with your problem... but they know nothing. Whereas if local people were trained and educated into doing that job, the life-skills they have is... you know a lot of the people that work in this area could do the job, like the rest of the workers in this area. Because they've got the experience, they've been through it themselves. (Helen)

Thus, opposition to non-local 'professionals' and the importance placed on employing local people in community projects supposed an underlying antagonism existed between local people and more 'official' bodies. Where local projects were staffed by non-local professional workers, there was a fear that these would take over and change the nature of local community organisations. There was a suspicion

that the kinds of bureaucratic procedures and rules used to assess people's needs and demands in the statutory sector would be applied in local organisations. Professionalised services were also seen to contain elements of stigma and moral blame, making them less accessible and receptive to local residents. By contrast, a commitment to collective agency and local control rested upon the belief that local residents would be more likely to use and benefit from services provided in an environment perceived as belonging to and run by 'the community'.

> People often feel that these resources are not theirs and feel shy about going into their building to use the photocopier or whatever, even though they're funded to be a resource for local people. Which is different from BADA [the local arts and drama association], where people are dropping in all the time to ask to use the photocopier or whatever. Even then, people often ask how much it will cost rather than seeing the place as a community building. We believe in supporting groups and campaigns and letting them use the equipment... and often meeting the costs of that, even though our funding doesn't cover that. (Margaret)

One or two activists argued that a more insidious effect of professional intervention was the subtle imposition of a system of social control whereby local people's efforts were safely channelled down acceptable channels and more radical proposals were watered down. One activist complained that proposals intended to give people greater control over resources by obliging local developers to take on local labour were gradually dropped under pressure from professional workers.

> I was involved in the tenant's association and we started to look at these housing associations. Basically the council's saying they've not got the money to do anything with the houses so there's an incentive that people do it for themselves then, right... along the lines of a community co-operative housing association. [...] But again, as soon as the professionals got hold of it, you know.... We fought for local employment... see we could set up our own building company. They said where's the money gonna come from [inaudible], right. We'd get the government to pay them... all these schemes that they're running, we'll get them altogether, put them in a pot and we'll see what'll come out of it. Cannae do that, they says. I says course we can, of course we can. It's never been done, we'll do it. But one of the stipulations is that when you're wanting to set up a housing association, you have another housing association running your budget, till you get [inaudible] These are professionals... they're sharks... they are. And so what happened was I seen what was coming and I resigned, I said no, this has already been

decided on. Now, with what we started off with and what we have now, it's totally different. There's no' gonna be any local people building them hooses. There's not gonna be any local maintenance men maintaining these hooses... The contract's gonna go to some big developer. You know like... I rest my case. (Tommy)

Community identity and conceptions of poverty

The discussion so far has drawn attention to two distinct conceptions of community in the accounts of community activists. In the first conception, emphasis was placed on the diversity of interests and groups that made up the community. Community was understood in a passive sense as referring to the inhabitants of a particular geographically bounded area without denoting any real sense of shared interests or identification with others in the area. Local people were described essentially as individual actors who operated according to their own personal interests and strategies. They became involved in community groups and activities only where they perceived tangible benefits in terms of their own needs and goals. The community was viewed in largely passive terms as the object of local services and interventions, rather than as a source of common interests and collective agency.

This contrasted with a second more active conception of community. According to this meaning, the community was perceived as an important social agent representing the shared interests, social identity and welfare of local people. A collective consciousness was assumed to exist among residents, based on the common experience of structural disadvantage and relative deprivation. This gave rise to strong sense of community identity built upon the resourcefulness, coping skills and self-reliance of local people. It was recognised that many individuals had limited opportunities to improve their circumstances through their own personal efforts. However, through involvement in forms of collective action and community-based organisations, people could take greater control of their lives in ways that enhanced their welfare. Thus people gained a feeling of pride, dignity and worth through their struggle and resistance against the conditions that they faced. The meaning of community was therefore bound up with social values, relations and organisations which constructed a sense of community membership and identity.

These different understandings of community appeared to be based on different conceptions of poverty identified in the last chapter. We saw that many local

activists expressed strong opposition to the idea that local residents and the community were 'poor'. This was true even among those who stated that poverty existed in the area. On further investigation, it was found that the meaning of poverty understood by these activists was one which identified poor people as a stigmatised social group, existing outside of the mainstream of society. Linked to this conception of poverty was an understanding of community which placed local residents within a separate social category of 'poor people', identified by their failure, inadequacy and inferior status.

This notion of community, which we might characterise as a weak conception of community, was invariably tied to a passive conception of poverty, which placed its on the identification of particular individuals and groups as poor. Activists who drew attention to the diverse range of circumstances, groups and interests within the area also argued that local people should not be lumped together and assigned a particular social identity. The denial of community was therefore a rejection of the perceived branding of local people as poor and their representation as a stigmatised social category. Local people were not identified by their membership of the community, but by reference to social categories such as single-parents, elderly people, low-income households, each having concerns and interests which transcended geographical boundaries. The existence of anti-social or self-destructive behaviour among some individuals and groups in the area was acknowledged, but it was stressed that such problems existed everywhere and were not confined to people living in the locality. Overall, this represented an attempt to narrow the perceived gap between local residents and people living in other areas.

Some activists took a quite different attitude which recognised local people as an identifiable community, but rejected the particular set of meanings conveyed about the local people through the label of poverty. Their approach was to assert a much more positive conception of the community. They accepted that many local people were poor in the sense that they experienced conditions of relative deprivation. However, by stressing the positive aspects of the local community and the coping ability of local residents these activists hoped to dissociate them from the demoralisation and resignation associated with poor people as a social category. The community was associated with a positive sense of identity and regarded as the most important means of enhancing the welfare of residents. It testified to the self-reliance and resourcefulness of local people, their active participation in community organisations and their common struggle against poverty.

A more passive conception of community was strongly associated with 'personal' or 'professional' perspectives on local issues and problems. The community was perceived in negative terms as a form of social identity which set local people apart from the mainstream. Identification with the community therefore served to identify residents by reference to notions of poor people as weak, dependent or inadequate. On this basis, these activists argued that residents were keen to dissociate themselves from the community which served to draw attention to a disparity between their lives and those of people living in other areas.

A more active conception of community was closely linked to the expression of 'community' or 'political' perspectives. It arose from the belief that local residents faced a common set of constraints and disadvantages in fulfilling their needs and aspirations, as a result of the poor reputation and low status of the area. This gave rise to a strong sense of collective identity, mutual aid and social solidarity among local residents which transcended the particular interests of specific individuals, groups or neighbourhoods within the area. The community was perceived as a positive and constructive force in people's lives which enabled them to maintain their dignity and self-respect in the face of difficulty. It was argued that the needs of residents could best be met through the development and strengthening of local social networks and the encouragement of community self-help activities. In this way, a more general mobilisation of local people was encouraged to take action on the social problems and issues which affected them.

Underlying both of these different approaches was a perception that local people's need for an acceptable identity and self-conception was severely undermined by the identification of the community as poor. A weak conception of community was associated with the understanding of identity as an attribute of the person and a function of their particular circumstances, social position and status. A person's identity was shaped through various forms of social distinction and status differentiation established between individuals, social groups, neighbourhoods and so on. A positive identity and self-image was secured by distinguishing oneself from less worthy, deserving or successful groups. It was also attained through attaching oneself to and seeking to emulate the life-styles, values and behaviour of those with a more secure and respectable social identity. It was therefore necessary to establish an identity which separated one from the community of poor people and demonstrated membership of the category of 'ordinary' people .

So for those activists who held a passive and negative conception of community, the achievement of a positive identity depended on making available to individuals the means, opportunities and resources to improve their life-styles and participate in range of social activities. Community activity was therefore concerned with securing forms of social welfare and provision at the local level which would help overcome the constraints and lack of resources preventing people from leading a 'normal' life. It provided a means of enhancing people's capabilities, their self-image and their ability to participate in society by removing them from conditions of social deprivation which incurred a negative identity and status. Community activity was, according to this view, undertaken by a small minority of activists on behalf of and for the benefit of local people, viewed passively as the community. For these activists it was immaterial whether those who helped to bring about change were locals or professionals. It was the impact of community-based organisations on meeting local needs and on increasing the capability of individuals to improve their living standards that was important, rather than the aim of fostering a strong sense of community and local autonomy.

In contrast to this, those activists who held a more positive conception of community believed that it was through promoting a sense of collective identity that people came to acquire a positive sense of themselves. As individuals, they might feel powerless to change their circumstances and improve their lives. When they interpreted their circumstances in relation to normative standards of success and failure, they became aware of their lack of status and self-respect. However, it was possible to resist the imposition of negative forms of identity and to nurture more positive sources of self-esteem, worth and status through their membership of the local community. The employment of alternative discourses such as those which drew on an imagery of the respectable working-class community, enabled local residents to contest the more usual representation of their lives as poor, helpless or deviant.

Accordingly, it was believed that residents' interests and needs were best served through forms of activity and organisation that encouraged a positive sense of collective identity and community membership. The 'community' was identified as the main agent of change, rather than particular individuals perceived as local activists. And it was the community that emerged as a significant source of local welfare, through the various forms of self-help, mutual aid and collective action

engaged in by local people. The goal of community-based action was to strengthen people's awareness of their role as collective social agents and to raise the potential for community empowerment through engagement in constructive action to overcome the disadvantages they experienced. In this way, they acquired a more acceptable identity as subjects able to influence and control their lives. Activity which expressed and reinforced the collective agency and power of ordinary people was therefore to be encouraged.

To summarise, we have found two distinct and contrasting views among community activists concerning the relationship between community and identity. For some, the community was perceived primarily in terms of its negative effects on personal identity. According to this view, local people tended to dissociate themselves from a form of social identity which acted to set them apart from other people and to exclude them from mainstream of society. These activists therefore played down the role of the community as an identifying or motivating force and emphasised the social distinctions and differences that existed within the locality. For the second group of activists, the negative identification of local people as poor, down-trodden and dependent was resisted through the assertion of a positive conception of community. This approach centred on the construction of a community consciousness and identity through forms of collective action and self-help and the encouragement of strong social networks and informal associations.

Community-based strategies and rationales

The activists contacted in this study were involved in a range of different activities and concerned with a multitude of groups, issues, organisations and committees (see appendix for further details). They included: a local food co-operative; a credit union; local housing groups; playschemes and creches; youth clubs; local community centres; clubs for the elderly; community transport groups; women's groups; and drama groups. This section looks at how activists understood and explained their involvement in these various community groups and activities. In particular, I address the question of how local activists perceived the role and significance of community-based activity as a means of improving local people's welfare. In the interviews, I concentrated on the following questions:

- What can community-based activity hope to achieve for local people and what are its limitations?
- What is its significance in relation to other forms of social welfare provision?
- Which individuals or groups are intended to benefit and in what ways?

I have already established a number of fundamental differences in the way that activists perceived the meaning of poverty and community in relation to local people's lives. An important difference which emerged in the earlier part of this chapter concerned the nature of the relationship between the individual and the community as perceived by activists. An active and positive conception of community focused on the collective agency of local people, the promotion of their welfare through forms of community organisation and self-help and the construction of a positive identity and self-image through membership of the community. A weak and passive conception of community assumed that local individuals were more concerned with enhancing their own relative position, maintaining status distinctions and increasing their personal access to resources and opportunities than with becoming directly involved in community activity. According to this more individualistic conception of welfare, the community was perceived as a negative source of identity and stigma from which many residents sought to distance themselves. These opposing perspectives were linked to quite different understandings of the role and purpose of community-based activity.

In the interviews, activists were asked how community-based initiatives helped to enhance the individual and collective welfare of local residents. They were asked about the aims and achievements of the particular groups in which they were involved and about the contribution of community-based activities in general to the improvement of people's well-being. Analysis of their responses revealed four distinct approaches to community-based activity, which are described below. Each of these rests upon a particular framework for understanding the role and significance of community-based activity. The key differences relate to their view of the relationship between the individual and the community; their interpretation of the needs and interests of local people and their scope for agency given the constraints that they face; and their understanding of the interrelationship between poverty, identity and welfare. These four perspectives place their emphasis respectively on:

- The promotion of individual empowerment through increasing opportunities and encouraging self-improvement and social mobility.

- The provision of local social amenities and locally-based services which help to improve conditions for particular groups.

- The encouragement of local autonomy and self-help through strengthening local resources, social networks, self-help groups and forms of community involvement.

- The encouragement of community mobilisation in order to change the negative status of the area and to win resources to improve conditions in the locality.

1. Individual empowerment

This approach to community-based activity focused on the lack of prospects and incentives in the area and saw its main aim as enhancing capacities and opportunities of local people. It was underlined by the view that some people in the locality were trapped in poverty and excluded from society by their conditions and lack of opportunities. Thus the main aims of community-based activity were to raise individual confidence and self-esteem; enhance skills and education; improve motivation and incentive; and increase people's knowledge of the various social, educational and training opportunities open to them. The emphasis was on personal change and empowerment. Individuals would be encouraged to take control of their lives, regain their self-belief, pursue their rights to services and make full use of different kinds of provision and resources available in the locality.

This understanding of community-based activity as a means of achieving personal change was frequently based on activists' accounts of how their own involvement in local groups had helped change their lives. For example, two activists spoke of how their participation in a local women's education and training project led them to re-evaluate their personal lives and job strategies. Their contact with this organisation helped bring about a change in their self-image, confidence and identity which enabled them to take control of and change their situation.

> So they're giving you a new perspective in your ways of looking at things. And for women who have not really had any encouragement from their parents or their husbands or their partners or maybe just themselves, a lot of them are single-parents, they've had

no self-esteem and to get these positive comments and to recognise their skills, I think it's helped them... inside, you know, their inner confidence. (Eve)

Another activist described in similar terms her work in a local project for young mothers. She argued that contact with community projects helped women to overcome their sense of being trapped and powerless and encouraged them to adopt a more strategic approach to their lives.

So it's giving people opportunities they wouldn't have otherwise?
Yes, it's about helping them to look at themselves and find out what they have got to offer. Because if you're sitting about the house you dinnie have the chance to do that, to sit down and look at you and look at what experiences you have and what you could pass on to others. In a group setting you do have, especially in the work that I do, and I think the project and myself are seen as tools to help them build up their confidence. We give them opportunities and options that they might want to take up when they leave our project, whether that might be going to college, or maybe some of them are already qualified in hairdressing and decide they want to go back to work. These are the options that I'm putting to them, so when they leave us, we would like to think or hope that they're a lot more confident than they were when they came, they know what they want out of life, they know that they're not alone, they've maybe got small children and they feel that they're coping better with life, they're coping better with themselves and they can actually move on. And I think that most projects are like that. They see themselves as a tool in helping people to move on to other things. (Cathy)

For these activists, community based activity made sense within a framework that prioritised individual agency, empowerment and advancement. Local strategies to tackle the high rate of long-term unemployment in the area were conceived in essentially individualist terms and based on enhancing individual capability and competitiveness in the job market. According to this view, community projects could help the unemployed to overcome their loss of confidence and self-esteem and provide advice and counselling on various training and job opportunities that were available. Emphasis was placed on the constraints of childcare, financial hardship and lack of confidence that prevented people taking up job and training opportunities.

It's about encouraging people to better their life-styles, whether that be to go back into employment or to go back into further education. And to do that they need to have that

> access to do that. They need to have... and that access is a lot of things, that means things like, you know, looking at their financial background, what that might be, if they're on Income Support. What kind of financial back-up are they going to get... is that going to be via a grant or is it going to be a top-up and Income Support, so that they're going to be able to afford to do their education and look after their family at the same time? Or does it mean that you have a childcare facility where you can go to work and go back to college knowing that you can leave the children in a facility that has got professional workers working in it, who are giving first-class care to your children and who are taking a minimum fee at the end of the day? (Cathy)

There was some acceptance of the limitations of this approach. But there was little scope for the expression of a more collective response within what was essentially an individualist framework. Community activity was principally about helping and encouraging individuals to improve their own circumstances, job strategies and life-styles through a variety of local training programmes and support projects. This was based on the view that a person's identity and self-perception and their sense of capability, worth and potential were directly related to their circumstances and social position. The role of community-based organisations was to enhance the personal strategies of the greatest number of individuals rather than to foster a sense of community membership and collective identity.

2. Local social amenities

The desire for more and improved local facilities was high on the agenda of all respondents. For those activists who adopted what I called a professional perspective on local issues (and to a lesser extent, those who adopted a personal perspective), increasing the availability of and access to local services, resources and social activities was the main objective of community activity. The provision of good local social services was regarded as an important means of enhancing residents' opportunities and capabilities. An example of this was the provision of childcare facilities to enable women to take up employment or training opportunities. But social amenities were also a means of improving the quality of life for the large number of residents whose circumstances excluded them from the labour market. This was especially so for the elderly, disabled, children and young people and those with special needs.

The importance given to local social amenities related to a social welfare strategy which emphasised the needs of those in the community who were excluded from the labour market and so lacked sufficient financial resources. A primary objective was to improve the quality of life for local people by ensuring the provision of a range of services, goods and other benefits which would be open and accessible and meet the specific needs of different groups in the area. Of particular importance were local housing improvement programmes. These contributed to better living standards and raised morale in the area by making people feel more positive about their local environment. New local facilities could also help encourage a sense of community by creating a focal point for people in the neighbourhood. Thus, improved social provision and amenities in the area were seen as having desirable secondary effects in terms of people's quality of life. This point is made by the following speaker:

> *So what are you hoping for with a new community centre?*
> It's mainly for meeting places and spaces for groups, creche facilities and mother and toddler groups. We wanted an outside football playing area.
> *So you'd see a new centre as helping to encourage greater community involvement in the area?*
> Oh yeah. When you speak to people they say that would be a great thing. They're maybe not prepared to put in the amount of work as those people who are active, but they'd certainly use it and see it as a great thing in the area. There's no question about that. It's like when people realised what the policy was with the bus, that it was open and accessible and it was up to them to get off their back-sides really. And they have done, there's been a lot of groups... and you look at the time sheets and you think it's just amazing how much that bus is being used now. A lot of people are benefiting from that who in the main wouldn't have done if that transport wasn't available. Because they don't have the personal resources to go out and do things off their own back. They've got the potential to do things now and when people realise that they will come along and join in, when they see something that they... a place that they can use, you know. (Alan)

This view of community activity is frequently associated with a 'professional' style of discourse which highlights social needs within the community and the gaps in existing provision within the locality. The influence of a community development perspective is often apparent in the priority given to getting clubs up and running and the concern with 'reaching the community' and informing local people of the range of activities and facilities available.

> Whether people are asking for it or not, there's always things people want and need and unless you start pushing to find out what they want, whether it's available and for what age... the kids arenae a problem. If there's something they want, they'll come and tell you, Jill, it's not fair, the girls have got the keep-fit, what about us? There's always somebody here that the kids can relate to. And the older kids are going to be parents themselves in the next ten years. But it's getting their parents... See the old ones have got their lunch clubs. It's the in-between age group, say from 30 to 50. Cause there's not a lot... well there's quite a lot for them living down here like, but there's not a lot for them, just keep-fit. So we need more activities for them, but it's finding out what they want. (Jill)

As well as the value attached to having well-resourced community centres serving the residents of particular neighbourhoods, these activists stressed the importance of facilities and services to meet the needs of particular sections of the population. These included day clubs for the elderly, creche facilities, credit unions and fruit and vegetable coops, and projects concerned with a variety of health, welfare and advice issues. As well as providing social activities, goods and services at a subsidised rate, thereby helping to reduce the cost of living, they also encouraged greater social participation and enjoyment. Finally, the provision of social amenities was seen as a way of preventing or reducing potential social problems caused by a growing population of unemployed, bored or disaffected youth in the area.

For these activists, the objective of community activity was to bring about tangible improvements in the locality which had a visible, if not measurable, effect on the quality of local people's lives. The employment of professional workers within community projects was supported as a means to increase the benefits to individuals. These activists were essentially pragmatists for whom the ends, in terms of greater resources and tangible improvements, justified the means. They believed that most local residents were more concerned with bringing about concrete changes of immediate and direct benefit to themselves than with ideas about community.

> I was against what they did here [i.e. the private houses], cause they should have been done by the council, but now it's been done it's one of the best things that has ever happened. [...] Because this place was a tip, whether it was a community or not. I mean I like living in a community but I like living in a nice place. (Norma)

Above all, these activists saw their role as promoting local activity and groups to improve the quality of life and forms of support and social enjoyment for people in the area. These included community transport schemes and creches, social activities, youth clubs and pensioners clubs and other community facilities. They were generally involved as paid session workers or volunteers in the more formal and established community organisations in the area which had been set up to meet particular needs. They often worked closely with professional workers and statutory bodies.

For these activists, the term community was used simply to describe the local population in a way that drew attention to the need for localised services and amenities, open and accessible to all. There was scepticism concerning the existence of common interests or collective consciousness as a basis for community action. Local residents were perceived not as a collective force for change but as a target population to be reached and served by locally-based projects.

3. Local autonomy and self-help

Among some activists, community activity was perceived as a traditional response to the precariousness and lack of resources experienced by working class people. It was born out of a tradition of solidarity, mutual support and self-reliance. These activists believed that a growing emphasis on more formal and professionally run projects undermined the importance of local people's own informal systems and networks of help and their sense of community ownership. They stressed the fact that residents had always organised their own clubs, social activities and forms of assistance as a means of surviving through periods of financial difficulty and of improving the quality of their lives. The more successful community projects and groups today originated in forms of mutual help and social action developed by local residents, often years ago.

> The playscheme is run by volunteers and this one at Royston has a good reputation, perhaps because of the continuity, we've had the same people involved. [...] We've been at it 20 odd years. I've been organiser here for 16 or 18 years. I've got 3 generations in this playscheme. My granddaughter is a youth helper now. (Irene)

I have been involved in BADA [Blackmuir Arts and Drama Association] for 8 or 9 years. That came out of a community group having a fun day for the children and led to idea of having a bigger yearly Gala. And out of that people thought it would be good to have some sort of arts project for people in the community.

So it was a local initiative?

Oh definitely. It was started by people in the community. It was nothing to do with the council. In fact, they didn't want it when it was first mentioned it was knocked back. (Lorna)

Many of the activists who adopted this particular view of community activity had been instrumental in setting up local groups and projects. These included local playschemes and youth clubs, arts groups, pensioner's lunch clubs, holidays and trips for local children, food coops and credit unions. These activities helped to promote a sense of promote mutual aid and self-help among local residents. For this reason, they should be supported and funded. A number of claims were made relating to the particular benefits and advantages in encouraging autonomous local activity rather than outside involvement. First, there was a belief that local people's own knowledge, skills and hard work were essential to the success of local projects. As one activist commented

Resources are not just money or buildings but the people who get things going and help to achieve things and the knowledge and information around in the community. (Moira)

Related to this was a belief that local people's knowledge and experience of the community was of greater value than professional expertise. It was felt that priority should be given to employing local residents in community projects who showed themselves to be involved in and committed to the community. They would be more accessible to and more easily accepted by local people who often felt intimidated or disempowered when professionals were involved.

A lot of the people... they dinnie want to speak to a social worker. There's a kind of stigma attached to that. People know that you've got a social worker going in. When I go in, I'm only a person who goes about the area. they know me from playschemes and all the groups, I could be just visiting for anything. [...] I think there should be somebody in every area doing that kind of thing. There is still a need for that doorstep... just somebody actually going into their house and helping because some people can't make

the effort to go... just to give them that wee bit of encouragement to go to the advice centre if they've got debt problems or any kind of problems. (Lorna)

A third reason for favouring self-help groups run by local people was the desire to avoid being treated as passive victims and charity cases. Locally-run groups facilitated forms of social interaction, information exchange and personal help which were largely absent in more formal settings where 'clients' came in for specific types of assistance and left quickly afterwards. One activist, for example compared the success of a community-based job skills club staffed by a local man to other more formal employment and training organisations set up in the area.

I think that really local people have never had a lot to do with the TEC. With the job skills club you've got a man who knows the area and he's come through it all himself. The job skills club is looked on more as a meeting place for sharing problems... it's not been made the sort of place where you only go to if you're looking for a job. People meet in there and I know that Arthur [the project worker] would never turn anybody away and I think that it's because of that, he's gained a lot of respect in the area. Because out of him not doing that, maybe he's spotted something in somebody who has dropped in one day, thinking well you'd be good at this or you'd be good at that. He has got quite a number of people into jobs. (Margaret)

A final argument in favour of locally-run organisations was their greater freedom and autonomy compared to statutory and more formal bodies. The latter were seen as bound by bureaucratic procedures and rules specifying targets, the groups to be assisted, the use of resources and so on. By contrast, informal community groups and projects run by local people were seen to enjoy a high degree of flexibility and discretion in the use of their resources. This was important in enabling these groups to work in ways which helped create a more positive sense of identity and involvement among local people - the value of which could not be measured in quantitative terms.

Do you have a lot of freedom in the way you do your work?

Oh aye, the management committee just trust me to do my work and support me... I have got a lot of freedom. Right from the beginning it was up to me to go ahead and do what I wanted to do and I give them an update at the meetings once a month. If I do go urban aid funded I won't have that freedom because it'll all be written into your job remit.

So that freedom has been important to your work and your ability to help people directly, without lots of form-filling, accounting for your time, etc., as you'd have in the statutory services?

Aye, a lot of my job is like that, just word of mouth and just meeting people and saying we'll start tonight, come along tonight, and getting volunteers that way. Maybe that's why people can relate to me better than a person who they see as part of the system. That's how I've got all my playscheme volunteers, there's about 10, they change as some people move out the area, but I've got new ones. (Lorna)

The role of local groups in overcoming social isolation, reducing costs and encouraging social participation, was coupled with the aim of promoting a strong sense of solidarity and community membership. Community action helped encourage forms of self-reliance and mutual aid in the community, which built upon the strengths and resources of local people. However, this goal was undermined, in their view, by the increased funding, size and professionalisation of local projects and the growing number of local projects 'parachuted into the area' with little reference to residents' priorities and needs.

4. Community mobilisation

In this approach to community activity, emphasis was placed on the need for an area-wide strategy to lift the area and reverse its negative status as undesirable, run-down and overwhelmed by social problems. A primary concern was to create a more positive image both among local residents and outsiders. This view was closely linked to a 'community' or 'political' perspective which located the causes of local problems and issues in the lack of sufficient resources and investment in the area. As the area became more run down, the social and economic base of the community became weakened by the flight of better-off residents so that its negative status was further reinforced. A specific and long-term strategy to regenerate the area was required in order to reverse the gradual process of decline that had set in.

Because what we do need is a plan. But we don't want to bring in a plan so that people who get jobs will immediately say right, we've got a wee bit more money now, we'll move out. We want the people to still want to stay in this area. So to encourage people to stay in the area you've to provide a lot of resources or services, or both. You have to have employment, you have to have decent housing, you have to have play areas,

> community centres, good shops. Even recreational things. Cause people don't work all the time so there has to be something for them to do when they're not working. And I think that all of these things go together as being very important. [...] So the part of our community that is able-bodied and able to work, if they could get jobs then it helps the rest of the community, and the shops, and the schools. But what encouragement have they got? If there's nothing... no recreational facilities, no jobs, they stay in horrible, terrible housing... what aims are there? If it was me, I'm sure that the only aim I would have would be to get out. (Pat)

The regeneration of the area depended on encouraging those in secure employment to remain in or move into the area. This would require a programme of housing investment and rebuilding. The District Council's lack of funds for its own building programme meant that many of these activists had come to support a combination of housing association, housing co-operatives and even private sector initiatives, as part of a strategy to help lift the area. In this way they hoped to eradicate the negative image of the area and to blur the differences between this and other more 'respectable, working-class' areas. This required a real improvement in local conditions and not simply a symbolic change of name to attract people into the area.

> The architects advised us to change the name, because of the stigma, said we'd never get anywhere. [...] But we're not wanting to change the name Blackmuir, we're wanting to change the image of Blackmuir... you know, Blackmuir itself. They advised us to call ourselves East Riseholme Housing Association. If we did that the rest of Blackmuir would wash its hands of us. [...] Everybody I know that comes from Royston Park talks about Royston Park the way it was and the name is still there. (Margaret)

An important part of community activity for these activists was the promotion of a sense of co-operation and collective purpose through the establishment of an area-wide strategy to regenerate the area. This was necessary to overcome the fragmentation of the community into different groups and neighbourhoods all seeking their own separate aims and objectives. They wanted to see a greater level of planning and resource allocation which treated the area as a whole and helped avoid a free-for-all in which different interest groups pursued their own separate strategy. Consultation should involve a wide range of local groups and ensure that local involvement was not restricted simply to well-known activists and groups in the area.

I would like to see some kind of forum set up for people who have a vision of what the area could look like. In fact, even if you could get people from the area together for a weekend and work with someone... and go for that ideal. What is everything you would like in this community to make it a good place to live? So you could design what people think they needed. I think it would be a wonderful exercise. And okay, it might start away up here, and you'd never be able to do that, but if that's the model you've got, even if you come somewhere in the middle, it's bound to be major. At present, what happens is that there's mailing lists sent out [...] but they always manage to miss out some folk. Then you have to understand what they're sending out. Also it doesn't encourage new people to get involved. Whose to say that a mother and toddler group wouldn't be interested? I think they would be very interested. I mean you have groups of people working with children coming up with their ideas of what they would want for the area. For me, I'd be going around the community groups in Blackmuir and speaking to people personally and saying to them do you realise how important this is. And if we don't stick together on this and put our plans on paper then again, we'll just have what everybody else thinks we need, not what we want. And I think it's worthwhile putting a bit of time into that and going round all the community groups and asking if they can come to the meetings. (Pat)

Thus underlying this approach to community activity, with its emphasis on local participation and collective action, was the perception of the local community as an interest community. Community-based action was undertaken in order to cultivate a sense of commitment to and pride in the community, thus overturning the negative image of the area as a place of last resort and failure. Its goal was to stimulate and sustain a collective consciousness and a belief in the possibility of change and improvement at the level of the community.

I hope that the role that we're playing is we're making everyone realise, through whatever means we can, that this is a good place to stay, that people have got a lot going for them and that they have some worth and also encouraging them to be active in making the place better, through any means that we can... and raising people's awareness about issues, in a fun way, but nevertheless, we're still raising people's awareness. I mean the drama group has been very popular recently. [...] So it's through things like that, we're making people aware of what could happen. And I think that's all we can do. We're not there to provide the answers, we're there to ask the questions. We're concerned about all age groups in the community but more on the cultural side, making people aware of their own culture.

So the basis of the community is the groups in the area?

Yes, they're all fighting to promote a positive image of the area and working with different groups of people to make them positive. [...] There's more optimism. There's a lot of tenants associations in the area now and they have achieved a lot. [...]

Are you optimistic?

I think the people in Blackmuir, the people involved in groups have all got a bit of optimism and think things will happen. And we keep saying to people, if you keep fighting things will happen, but you've got to keep fighting for it. (Pat)

Community activity, poverty and the construction of identity

When community activists were asked how they saw the impact of community activity on the lives of local residents, their responses varied between two extremes. At one end, there was the view that community-based activity was largely concerned with individual rehabilitation, helping people to change their behaviour and enforcing greater social control within the community. At the opposite end, community activity was regarded as a means to bring about external change through collective action and as a way of influencing social practices and policies that reinforced patterns of inequality and disadvantage. These two contrasting approaches to community activity might be characterised as social pathological and structuralist, with emphasis being placed on personal change and political change respectively. Most activists adopted an approach which fell somewhere between these two extremes.

Taking together the accounts of community activists, it was apparent that community-based activity was seen to have only a limited effect on poverty, defined as a material condition resulting from inadequate resources. When activists were asked whether community activity could help improve the financial and material circumstances of local residents, they were generally sceptical. There had been some success in improving local housing conditions and increasing forms of social provision, support and assistance in the community. There had also been some positive benefits for a small number of individuals who had acquired skills and experience which had enabled them to find employment or increased their access to opportunities and resources. But it was accepted that for many local residents, lack of income, material deprivation and financial difficulty were unlikely to be greatly

affected by forms of community activity. This was succinctly expressed by one activist as follows.

> You can build nice houses... front gardens and so on... and close your nice curtains and you've still got children asking what am I going to have for my tea and there's nothing in the cupboard. Unless they can find some way of going about it, at the end of the day the nice houses are going to become slum areas in the next 20 or 30 years, if people haven't got the money to look after them. And it cannae be the sort of jobs where you're going in and earning a pittance. It's got to be a job where you can afford to pay rent. This idea of getting a nice house, but living on benefit, I mean you're not improving your life in any way. You're maybe improving...you're going to bed at night and well I'm lying in a nice warm, dry, house. But what future's that for anybody. [Margaret]

One of the chief ways in which community activity was seen to have an impact on local people's lives was in helping to break down the low status and stigma assigned to residents of a deprived area. As we have seen, the four main approaches to community activity described in the previous section differed in their emphasis on particular goals and objectives - to enable people to escape from poverty through increasing their capabilities and opportunities; to improve people's quality of life through the provision of resources for local amenities, services and neighbourhood improvements; to strengthen the community as a source of welfare, pride and local integration; and to change the poverty status of the area and the processes which hindered local people's ability to meet their needs and aspirations. The essence of community activity, taking together these different approaches, was the concern to meet local people's need for a positive self-image and identity and a sense of social inclusion. This depended on changing the negative social identity associated with the community and the characterisation of residents as poor.

Quite different community-based strategies were described by activists depending upon whether an individualist or collectivist approach to local people's welfare was adopted. Approaches to community activity which prioritised individual empowerment and social amenities placed an emphasis on empowering the individual through increasing access to resources and services of various kinds in the locality. There was strong support for specialised or functional community-based projects performing clearly defined tasks and serving specific groups of the population. By contrast, community approaches which stressed local autonomy and community mobilisation gave importance to empowering the community as the

collective agent of local people's welfare. There was strong support for community action projects and self-help groups with a creative, flexible approach and serving the community as a whole. These groups helped to generate a pride in the community, through the promotion of drama, music and art, and to mobilise local people in the defence of their interests.

Approaches to community activity which were based on increasing individual opportunities and social amenities were linked to a more individualist conception of welfare. Priority was given to improving the individual's position and capability within a normative framework which valued personal achievement, social mobility and self-reliance. It was felt that residents did not generally see their needs and interests as bound up with the community. Instead, they were more concerned with demonstrating their relative well-being. The community was disowned as a form of social identity because it lumped residents together and drew attention to their collective poverty and weakness. Interest in community activity was therefore limited to forms of organisation and solidarity for the purpose of achieving specific, tangible improvements in their lives.

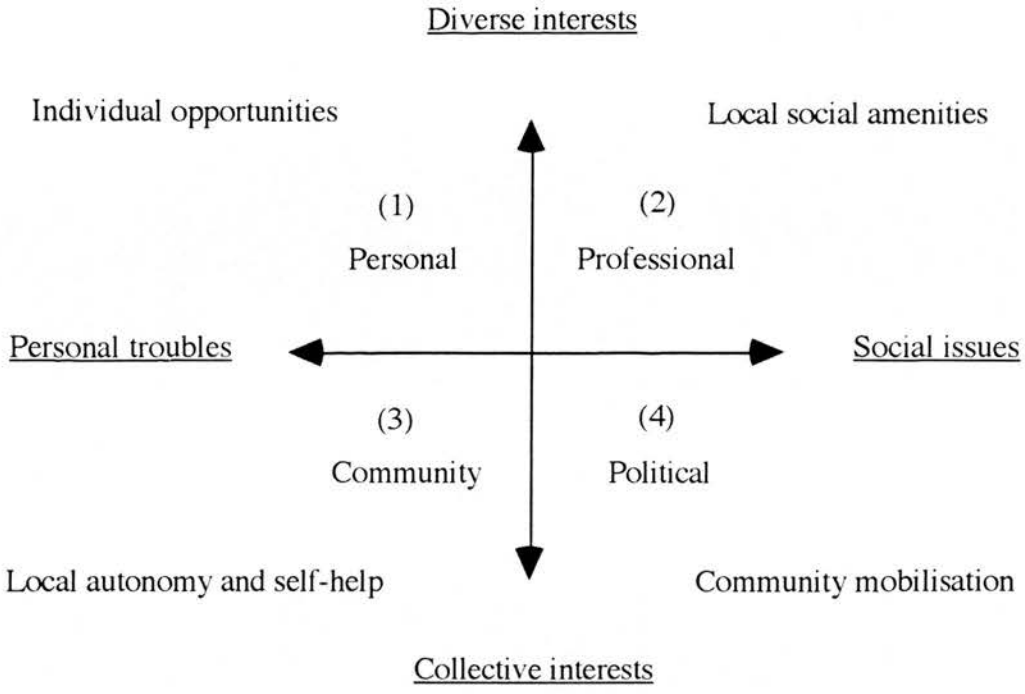
For these activists, the purpose of community-based activity was to increase the ability of individuals to participate as respectable and worthy members of society. Activists operating within this framework supported community activities which attempted to narrow the gap between local residents and the rest of society. They were more likely to stress that the community was not a single social group but included people in quite different circumstances with diverse interests and needs. Community-based action was directed at increasing provision in the locality rather than seeking to generate a strong community identity and to build support for area-wide organisations. Local services were designed to be universal and accessible and address the specific needs of individuals and groups without stigmatising them as 'poor' or 'problem' people.

More collective notions of welfare were apparent in approaches to community activity which stressed the importance of local control, social solidarity, self-help activities and community values. Community-based activity was undertaken as a means of resisting the imputation of a negative identity and status as poor people. It enabled people to interpret their circumstances in ways which relieved them of a sense of personal failure, weakness, or moral inadequacy. It also challenged the social representations and moral judgements applied to local residents through their

identification as poor people. The promotion of strong community values and a sense of collective agency, local autonomy, self-reliance and mutual support encouraged the construction of alternative sources of identity, personal worth and status through the community.

The importance of community-based projects for these activists was that they provided services and resources in ways which enhanced rather than reduced residents' autonomy and scope for control. The line between helper and helped was intentionally blurred in order to avoid reducing individuals to a dependent status and to promote forms of collective agency and mobilisation. Community empowerment was therefore about constructing an alternative frame of reference which increased people's power and ability to take control of their lives and promoted a view of local residents as active and morally worthy citizens. The aim was to build forms of identity which were based on a sense of community pride, local autonomy and collective agency. This contrasted with a narrow concern with private consumption, individual success and status differentiation as the basis of people's identity.

We can relate these different positions to the two-dimensional typology of activists established in the last chapter, which produced four distinct perspectives on local issues and problems. The 'personal' and 'professional' perspectives are more closely associated with an individualist framework in which community-based activity is directed towards improving the personal identity, social position and quality of life for individuals through the provision of specific services and opportunities. Forms of community-based activity are promoted which aim to narrow the gap between individuals in the community and residents of other areas. 'Community' and 'political' perspectives, by contrast, place greater emphasis on encouraging self-help activity and autonomous local organisations. They are underlined by a collectivist approach which gives priority to the promotion of a strong community identity as the basis for improving local people's welfare. This is illustrated on the following page.



The central issue underlying these different approaches to community activity is the meaning attached to community as a form of identity and its relation to various conceptions of poverty held by local activists. This relationship has to be understood in the context of the personal and social meanings of poverty identified in earlier chapters. The two main conceptions of poverty that emerged were based on a distinction between an 'experience-distant' conception which identified other people as poor, at a distance from the subject's own life and an 'experience-near' understanding of poverty which related more closely to the subject's own experience and circumstances.

The first of these was linked to an exclusive discourse on poverty which connected particular social and material circumstances to an identity as poor people. To be identified as poor was to be assigned to a subordinate social category denoting passivity, helplessness and dependence. This was experienced by individuals as a threat to their identity and self-image. But an alternative, more inclusive discourse of poverty was employed by some respondents which acknowledged the shortfall in people's material and social circumstances without relating this to forms of subjectivity or identity as poor people. Instead, poverty was linked to a positive

sense of identity based on people's engagement in personal and collective action to improve and take control of their lives.

In both cases, poverty was seen as having a particular bearing on people's identity and agency. Common to the accounts of all the local activists interviewed was the attempt to defend themselves against negative forms of identification associated with the idea of poor people and to construct a more positive sense of their identity. Where they differed was in their understanding of what the notion of community implied in terms of people's identity, social relationships and capacity for improving their lives. For some, the assertion of a strong sense of community identity, common interest and collective agency was a means of resisting the negative identity and status of poor people. Identification with the community allowed local residents to see themselves as self-reliant, positive and actively engaged in improving their lives, instead of internalising the low opinion and judgement of outsiders. For other activists, however, the identification of local people as a distinct community conferred a negative identity and status on them. It drew attention to a disparity between local residents and people in other areas which served to distinguish and separate them from 'respectable' society.

For those who sought to promote a strong community identity, the community was embraced as the cornerstone of their collective self-esteem and pride. This was bound up with an emphasis on the shared need of local residents to defend themselves against the imputation of a negative identity as poor people. Without an alternative frame of reference, local people were likely to internalise the identity and status assigned by others and perhaps give way to hopelessness, passiveness and failure. But through their sense of community, local people were able to construct a positive counter-image of themselves based on the assertion of their own capability, resilience and moral adequacy. Community activity therefore allowed people to increase their control over their lives rather than making them dependent on services which reinforced their inferior status, exclusion and lack of power. Community-based activity based on the perception of common interests and collective identity was therefore concerned with community empowerment.

For those who played down the significance of community, it was the sense of being identified as a distinct problem group and an object for social intervention to which they objected. The identification of the community as 'poor' served to establish their dependent status and their incapacity in the eyes of others. The notion of community

therefore lumped together the diverse needs and circumstances of local residents within the category of poor people, which reinforced the division between local people's lives and those of 'ordinary' people. Only by asserting their own self-reliance, capability and personal development as individuals, was it possible to construct a more positive identity. Community-based activity was interpreted as a means of closing the 'respectability' gap between local people and the rest of society through promoting individual opportunities and increasing local people's ability to participate as members of the wider society. Community activity was concerned, above all, with individual empowerment.

Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to explore the meaning and significance of community activity in relation to the themes of poverty, identity and agency discussed in the course of this thesis. I extended the analysis of community activists' accounts undertaken in the previous chapter by examining how different conceptions of community provided the basis for different understandings of community-based activity in terms of individual or community empowerment. This gave rise to different rationales and strategies at the local level: to strengthen the individual's opportunities, skills and resources; or to protect and secure people's well-being through the encouragement of forms of social solidarity and mutual aid. The latter aimed to increase the resources of the community and to instil a sense of community pride through the provision of locally-run, universally-based, non-stigmatising services. The former was geared to enabling individuals to participate more effectively in society and increasing their ability to secure resources and enjoy 'normal' levels of private consumption.

Central to an understanding of the goals and values of community activity from the perspective of local activists was their interpretation of the relationship between the social meaning of poverty as a form of social identity assigned to certain sections of the population and their view of how people constructed their identity and perceived their interests, goals and aspirations. The importance of community activity from the point of view of local activists lay in its role as a form of 'identity-constructing', activity which provided a means for local residents to overturn the negative and stigmatising social meanings associated with poverty. Implicit in much of what they said was the belief that their identity and membership of society were under threat as

a result of their marginal position in the labour market and the increasing residualisation of social welfare and its targeting towards those seen as especially poor and needy. If poverty was understood at the level of subjective experience as essentially a moral category, then community-based initiatives expressed people's need to sustain a sense of moral adequacy and social inclusion.

Both in this chapter and the previous one, activists frequently expressed the view that local residents were assigned a negative identity through discourses of poverty which dismissed them as poor people having no stake or worth in society. From this point of view, improving the welfare of local residents was not just a matter of increasing the material resources and social and economic opportunities of local residents. It was also about maintaining self-belief and dignity among local residents and securing their inclusion in 'respectable' society. The frequency with which activists drew upon an identity as respectable working-class people was one way in which they attempted to overcome the process of negative identification by which local residents were excluded and separated.

It was acknowledged that community-based activity could bring only limited improvements in the income and material circumstances of local residents. Its main impact was in meeting people's need for an acceptable identity as a consequence of their experience of being identified as poor. An important part of this was promoting a belief among local residents that they were able to affect their lives. Thus community activity was perceived as a response to the negative forms of identity associated with being poor in society and the depiction of residents as passive, dependent and helpless. For some activists, community activity offered the possibility of increasing individual resources and strengthening their household strategies in order that they might distance themselves from the status of poor people in society. For others, it presented an opportunity to challenge the social meanings associated with material hardship and to construct a more positive view of their collective agency, capability and identity.

These various approaches to community-based activity shared one thing in common: concern for the welfare of local people was inextricably tied to questions of identity which were bound up with the social meanings of poverty and the construction of poor people as a social problem group. Whether local activists drew on a notion of collective identity or not as the basis of community-based activity depended on whether they perceived the community as a means of protecting themselves from the

negative status of poor people, or as the means by which their identity as poor people was established. In either case, community action was intended to enhance the welfare of residents in ways which recognised people as subjects and actors and not simply as the passive recipients of welfare services.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Subjective and social meanings of poverty

In the course of this thesis, I have sought to provide an approach to poverty which gives priority to people's own experience, their strategies and their attempts to make sense of their circumstances. My primary concern has been neither with documenting the deprivations and hardships endured by 'the poor' nor with detailing the structural causes of their plight. Instead, I have been chiefly concerned with the meanings that people attach to their material and social conditions and how they understand and define poverty. Thus the study has looked at the ways in which people talk about poverty in relation to their own circumstances and those of other people. It has also set out to explore how their understanding of poverty draws on wider cultural and social images of poor people and various discourses on poverty.

I began this work by drawing attention to the lack of research which looked at the individual's experience of poverty. Several aspects of this were highlighted including the need to consider the changes in people's circumstances over time, their subjective perception of their own situation, the particular responses and strategies they developed to deal with poverty and the influence of the local social context and wider social meanings and discourses of poverty. A particular interest of the research was the scope for individual and collective forms of agency in situations of poverty and the nature and impact of more persistent experiences of poverty. It was suggested that a study of personal experience of individuals could contribute to a more precise specification of the relationship between structure and agency in understanding the dynamics of poverty.

In my review of the literature on poverty, I argued that research has concentrated on definitional issues whilst neglecting the study of the meaning and significance of poverty, especially for those who experience it. Much of this research has been concerned with locating the boundary between 'the poor' and the 'non-poor' in order to identify particular individuals and groups as poor. Debate has centred on the measurements and indicators used to define poverty as a condition of insufficient income, lack of material resources or social deprivation. By contrast, little attention has been paid to the meanings conveyed about poor people through this process of

identification, nor how these meanings were interpreted and negotiated by those whose social and material circumstances identified them as poor. To a large extent, the process of identifying people as poor on the basis of these definitions has been seen as unproblematic.

This study set out to give primacy to the subjective conceptions and definitions of poverty articulated by individuals and local community activists. It was important to show how people's interpretation of their circumstances drew on particular understandings of what it meant to be poor. Different conceptions of poverty were often the product of a range of cultural images and ideas about poor people which measured their worth and status in relation to normative standards of behaviour, achievement and success. In order to understand the experience of material hardship and the meaning of poverty for individuals, groups and communities identified as poor, it was important to look at how wider social meanings and representations of poverty come to shape people's self-perceptions and social relationships, their experience of different forms of social welfare and their personal coping strategies and responses.

One of the significant findings of this study was that the term poverty was considered problematic by many of those interviewed. The frequent denials of poverty articulated by respondents, both in talking about their own material circumstances and in discussing the problems affecting the locality, indicated that poverty was not simply a neutral or descriptive term relating to conditions of material hardship. It was interpreted in a way that linked these conditions to a particular identity and social position as poor people. For respondents in the study, the meaning of poverty was constructed through a particular discourse which focused on the characteristics of poor people as a distinct social category. The principle effect of this discourse was to set poor people apart as a group in terms of their loss of agency and inability to cope with material deprivation. To be identified as poor suggested a state of incapacity, failure and worthlessness.

This had important implications for the way in which people represented themselves in their accounts. The emphasis they placed on their own active role in managing and improving their situation was both an assertion of their moral adequacy and personal competence and an important element of their coping strategies, which made their situation liveable and bearable. It was a response to being categorised, identified and excluded through discourses on poverty which appeared to assign people in their

circumstances to a negative and stigmatising category. An important part of the experience of material hardship was therefore the struggle to retain a positive self-image, identity and sense of control where discourses on poverty tended to link such conditions to a particular identity and status as poor people.

Involvement in community activity was one way in which people redefined the nature of their circumstances and strengthened the sense of themselves as active copers and social agents able to determine the course of their lives. In this respect, two contrasting discourses on poverty were apparent. An 'exclusive' discourse of poverty constructed forms of categorisation which linked circumstances of material hardship to a particular identity as poor people. This discourse placed emphasis on the identification of people as poor in terms of characteristics which differentiated them as a group from other people. By contrast, a more 'inclusive' discourse was articulated by some activists which linked the experience of poverty to forms of self and group identification which established people as autonomous subjects and social agents, active in the construction of their own individual and collective welfare. Implicit in this discourse was an active resistance to forms of social categorisation regarded as pejorative, negative and stigmatising.

The experience of material hardship and the forms of action taken in response are therefore deeply affected by the social meanings and processes of categorisation implicit in these poverty discourses. What becomes clear in the study is that individuals interpret the meaning of poverty in ways which suggest that the dominant paradigm of poverty, with its emphasis on defining, quantifying and categorising poverty, constructs poverty very much as a problem of other people 'out there'. This was apparent in their accounts as a conflict between 'experience-distant' conceptions based on the construction of poverty as an anonymous and distant category and 'experience-near' understandings which placed greater emphasis on agency, identity and moral worthiness. My aim in this final chapter is to draw together some of the findings of the study and to discuss their implications for future research into poverty.

Poverty, material welfare and self-presentations

The study was initially undertaken in an effort to increase our knowledge of how poverty is experienced in the lives of individuals. I was concerned that people who

rarely encountered poverty in their own lives held a view of poverty shaped by cultural and social images of poor people which reinforced the impression that the 'the poor' existed as a distinct social group. Their understanding of poverty was constructed through exclusionary discourses which projected poverty as a problem of other people. There was also a feeling that this tendency to see 'poor people' as a separate and distinct social group having little connection to their own experience was barely disturbed or contradicted by the focus in poverty research on establishing definitions and measures of poverty. This encouraged experience-distant understandings and constructions of poverty, which invoked feelings of sympathy and concern, but rarely empathy.

The purpose of the research was therefore to raise questions about how poverty was constructed as a social issue. One of my chief objectives was to trace the connections between people's circumstances, their experience of poverty and their subjective well-being, as these changed over time. It was not designed to be a detailed study of the living conditions and subjective perceptions of a sample of 'poor people', which would have required that a particular definition of poverty was selected in advance. Instead, the approach adopted was to focus on the inhabitants of an area considered poor by the rest of society and to look at how residents themselves experienced and defined their circumstances. The 33 people interviewed in the study were all residents of an urban council housing estate associated with high levels of poverty, unemployment and deprivation.

The major themes explored in this study were first apparent as a series of paradoxes found in the accounts of respondents. At an early stage of the interviews, it was observed that respondents did not generally see themselves as poor. Furthermore, their accounts of their lives did not conform to the common picture of poor people's lives as characterised by misery and hardship, social exclusion and dependence and powerlessness and hopelessness. Indeed, respondents rarely mentioned poverty as a problem that affected their own lives, despite the fact that several of those interviewed reported that they struggled to make ends meet or that they had previously endured periods of deprivation and hardship. This pointed to a discrepancy between external definitions of poverty, which referred to a lack of material resources and the conceptions of poverty which people applied to their own circumstances.

For the most part, it emerged that respondents did not employ discourses of poverty in representing their own lives. References to poverty were rare and in the few cases where the term was used, its meaning was confined to unspecific and abstract statements about the growing incidence of poverty in society. Perhaps this was to be expected given the history of stigma and shame attached to being poor. This in itself would create a reluctance to see oneself as poor even if one did experience periods of material deprivation. But it suggested something deeper than this - that the forms of poverty discourse commonly employed by researchers, academics and journalists were problematic for those identified as poor. One of the principle reasons for this was that fact that discourses on poverty were generally constructed from the perspective of 'non-poor' subjects who referred to poverty as a problem of other people, quite separate from their own lives. These discourses were experienced as alienating and disabling for the very reason that they constructed a division between 'normal' people viewed as subjects and actors and poor people, who acquired the status of social objects.

A most striking finding was that respondents did not on the whole regard themselves as poor. Looking carefully at the explanations that people gave for this revealed the dominance of a conception of poverty based on particular ideas about poor people and their place in society. According to most definitions of poverty, it is the level of material resources that is the critical factor in identifying someone as poor. However, at the level of personal experience, the meaning given to the term referred to much more than a lack of material goods and principally concerned the nature of people's identity, agency and social position. The subjects of this study did not on the whole see themselves as poor, because they held an understanding of poverty that conflicted with their sense of themselves as social actors having a degree of control and influence over their circumstances.

The third finding which emerged during the initial phase of the research was that respondents placed great emphasis on their capability in managing their situation, their continued scope for action and control in their lives and their ability to overcome the difficulties and set-backs they experienced. It was these expressions of agency, rather than the constraints, hardships and deprivations that they faced, that dominated their accounts. This is not to say that respondents were satisfied with their circumstances or failed to recognise their lack of opportunities and resources. Indeed, there was clear evidence of material shortage and financial struggle and subsequent feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction as a result. But despite this, respondents

refused to see their lives as characterised by deprivation, dependence and hopelessness. Instead, they believed that it was their own strength of character and self-belief that was crucial to the maintenance of their well-being. In contrast to conceptions of poverty which depicted the poor as the casualties of social and economic forces outside of their control, respondents themselves spoke of their strong belief in the ability to improve their lives through their own actions and strategies.

Thus three important themes emerged in relation to the subjective experience and meaning of poverty. First, poverty discourse was revealed as problematic for people who were identified as poor. Second, poverty was understood not simply as a descriptive term referring to particular social and material circumstances, but as a form of categorisation which identified people in certain ways. Third, people's presentations of their lives stressed their personal agency, autonomy and self-determination. These three ideas appeared strongly inter-related, suggesting that respondents were keen to assert their personal capability and respectability in order to distance themselves from those they perceived as poor. The constant recurrence of the themes of agency, identity and adequacy alongside their frequent denials of poverty appeared to point to a particular conception of poverty which defined the poor in terms of their incapacity, loss of agency and inability to cope.

Poverty as a question of agency

The majority of the comments made by respondents on the theme of poverty were in response to questions which asked whether either they personally or local people generally were poor. Their replies were often contradictory, indicating that they understood and used the term poverty in a variety of different ways. In some respects, respondents felt they were poor, while in other ways they were keen to indicate that they were not. For example, when they looked at their living standards and material resources relative to other people, they did sometimes see themselves as poor. On the other hand, respondents were particularly resistant to the idea that they were poor where this implied membership of an identifiable social group, clearly differentiated from the rest of society.

This pointed to two quite separate conceptions of poverty. When respondents denied that they were poor, they were resisting a notion of poor people which appeared to

fix them in a particular social position and identity on the basis of their social and material circumstances. An important feature of this conception of poverty was the idea that those perceived as poor had moved into a separate social category, which came to define their identity and status in society. To be poor was not simply a matter of being worse off than other people; it was to be identified by reference to some critical distinction which suggested a clear separation of their circumstances from those of other people. Above all, it was to be categorised in a way that separated people in terms of their failure to manage and their dependence on the rest of society.

What differentiated the poor from the non-poor according to this conception was not the particular level of material shortage that was experienced, although respondents frequently identified the poor in terms of their lack of 'basic goods' or 'essentials'. It was the loss of agency that was critical. The poor were separated from other people by the fact that they no longer retained a sense of control over their lives. For subjects, what distinguished their own circumstances from those of other people was the fact that they managed to remain on top of things rather than becoming demoralised and incapacitated by the conditions they experienced. To be poor, by contrast, denoted an inability to cope with, respond to and overcome the problems associated with a lack of material resources; it was not the condition of shortage itself. Even where subjects admitted difficulties in managing, they pointed to their resilience, their self-belief and their coping ability as signs that they were not actually poor.

The attitude towards poor people that emerged in this conception was not one that blamed people for their condition. Rather, the poor were regarded as passive victims who were rendered helpless and inactive by their disadvantaged conditions, their lack of opportunities and resources. They were reduced to the status of non-agents, having no real capacity to affect their situation, their lives characterised by a sense of hopelessness and demoralisation. Implicit in this conception of poverty was the imputation of personal and moral inadequacy relating to an inability to fulfil social roles - as parents, workers, consumers and productive, self-reliant individuals. So while poor people were not held responsible for their poverty, the fact of being poor was equated with the removal of self-respect and pride. Overwhelmed by the social and material conditions they faced and unable to maintain a respectable way of life, 'the poor' became burdened with a sense of their personal failure and incapacity.

When respondents denied that they were poor, they did so by emphasising their continued ability to affect and improve their circumstances. They felt impelled to develop an account of their situation which did not undermine their sense of dignity and self-worth. Their statements frequently conveyed a conception of themselves as active subjects who managed to live respectable and active lives despite the hardships and disadvantages that they faced. Rather than focusing on the forms of deprivation that separated their lives from other people, subjects sought to demonstrate their moral worthiness and personal competence, through showing their commitment to socially-approved values and roles - self-reliance, the family, hard work, self-sacrifice and so on. They believed that it was their strength of character, resources and capacities that enabled them to avoid poverty. So while they saw material hardship or deprivation as caused by factors outside of their control, they claimed that the preservation and enhancement of their well-being depended on their own actions, decisions and coping strategies.

On the small number of occasions where respondents did indicate that they were poor, they made reference to a quite different conception of poverty. Crucially, this conception did not consign those identified as poor to a separate social category based on their incapacity and dependence, but was compatible with a view of individuals as social agents, seeking to maintain their welfare and self-respect. Nothing was implied about the coping or managing ability of those seen as poor, only that they lacked sufficient resources to meet their needs. It was therefore free of the connotations of personal failure and incapacity associated with the anonymous category of poor people. Poverty was associated with particular social circumstances and positions which constrained people's agency but did not render them helpless. Hence their statements on poverty demonstrated a close identification and empathy with people seen to be in a similar position to their own, rather than a sense of difference or distance between their own lives and those of 'poor people', perceived as a distinct social group.

When they identified themselves as poor, respondents were careful to indicate that it was this meaning that was being used. Two of those interviewed did regard themselves as poor at the time of the interviews and a further two described periods of poverty in the past. It was clear that in these cases, subjects were not identifying themselves as demoralised, unable to cope or dependent. They did however see themselves as constrained by particular circumstances which limited their access to resources through, for example, their exclusion from the labour market. This

conception of poverty was used to draw attention to the constraints of people's situations, their relative lack of resources and the forms of deprivation they experienced. However, it did so without implying a strong or permanent distinction between their own conditions and those of other non-poor groups.

The significant thing about this conception of poverty was that it enabled a sense of personal competence and moral worthiness to be demonstrated. Although poverty was defined in terms of the constraints on people's resources and opportunities, the experience of poverty was described in ways which drew attention to the qualities of resilience and resourcefulness displayed by people in their struggle to maintain a respectable life-style and standard of living. Respondents who identified themselves as poor emphasised that they retained their sense of pride, their responsibility to their families and their aspirations and goals throughout the periods of financial difficulty and material shortage that they experienced.

One of the main points to emerge from the study was the importance given to the notion of agency within each of these two conceptions and how this tied in with the issue of moral worthiness. The first conception of poverty rested upon a view of poor people as social objects, incapable of acting to help themselves or improve their conditions. The lack of agency implicit in this understanding of poverty was interpreted by reference to moral standards. The second conception of poverty drew attention to the constraints on people's agency and scope for choice; but it was through their continued struggle against the constraints that they faced that subjects demonstrated their strength of character and moral adequacy. In both cases, it was the relationship between poverty and agency that gave rise to the understanding of poverty as a moral category.

A second key variable which distinguished these two contrasting conceptions of poverty was the social distance separating the speaker from those referred to as poor. In identifying other people as poor, respondents drew on 'experience-distant' conceptions of poverty which distanced their own lives from those of 'the poor'. Poor people were described in terms of various identifying features such as their lack of agency and inability to cope, which distinguished them from 'normal' people like themselves. But when poverty was regarded as a social condition or process affecting people in similar social circumstances to their own, it was described in terms which implied no clear separation or division between the poor and non-poor. An 'experience-near' conception of poverty accorded primacy to their role as subjects

and social agents, actively involved in managing and improving their circumstances, rather than focusing on the kinds of constraints and difficulties they faced.

The difference between these two conceptions of poverty appeared to cut across the normal lines of poverty debate, dominated by a left-right division which counterposed individualist and structuralist perspectives. Much of this debate has been carried on as an argument between approaches to poverty which emphasise the individual's failure or irresponsibility to maintain themselves and those that see individuals as the victims of wider social and economic forces which they are unable to affect. Neither of these perspectives incorporates a notion of agency that is compatible with respondents' view of themselves as competent subjects who played an active role in the maintenance of their well-being. Individualist conceptions of poverty provide an interpretation of agency which assumes that individuals bear a measure of personal responsibility for their condition. Structuralist perspectives, on the other hand, identify people as poor in ways which appear to leave no real scope for personal agency.

Exclusive and inclusive discourses on poverty

In the second stage of the research, I attempted to broaden the scope of the study by looking at the operation of discourses of poverty in relation to the community. This part of the study focused on local community activists' understanding of the relationship between poverty, community activity and the locality. The community was examined as the focus of discourses on poverty which constructed local people as an identifiable problem group and as the target for a range of strategies and initiatives intended to counter the problems of poverty. It was also considered an important reference point, a source of positive action and a base for encouraging mutual support and pride among local residents. I set out to explore how various notions and ideas of community interacted with different discourses on poverty as the basis of particular rationales and strategies for community-based activity.

The importance of the themes of identity and agency within people's conceptions of poverty was also apparent in the accounts of local community activists. Some activists referred to specific groups in the locality as poor. Poverty was identified in relation to particular social positions and circumstances which appeared to fix people in poverty as a long-term or permanent condition. The meaning of poverty that was

applied in this case referred to the inability of the poor to live up to conventional social norms and values, provide adequately for their families and fulfil socially accepted roles. In these circumstances, people lost hope of changing their situation and came to see themselves trapped in circumstances beyond their control. They became increasingly dependent on the intervention and help of external bodies and alienated from mainstream society. 'The poor' were thus identified as members of a separate social world with its own cultural and social values.

The understanding of poverty used in identifying other people as poor appeared to derive from a particular discourse on poverty which separated the subject, as speaker, from those who were regarded as poor. The main feature of this 'exclusive' discourse on poverty was that it linked poverty, as a set of material and social circumstances, to a distinct identity as poor people. It was employed principally as a category of exclusion which located the problem of poverty among other people seen as poor. Poverty was constructed through a process of separation, categorisation and objectification. First, a clear division was constructed between the poor and the non-poor which separated the former in terms of their social and material circumstances. Second, poor people were placed within a distinct social category which assigned them an inferior status and position and conferred a degree of stigma and shame. Finally, poor people were situated as social objects rather than as social actors. They became targets for social intervention and research, passive recipients of social welfare and victims of social processes and practices. As such, they acquired a passive status as the 'done-to' rather than as 'doers'.

Although some activists employed this discourse in relation to certain groups in the area whom they regarded as poor, they objected to its use in relation to local residents as a whole. To describe the community as poor was seen to convey the impression of a community steeped in helplessness and dependency. First, local residents were seen as a separate group of the population excluded and alienated from society and trapped in a negative world of unemployment, crime, drugs, drink, violence and family breakdown. Second, the high incidence of particular characteristics associated with poverty in the area meant that local residents were labelled and lumped together in ways which assigned them a negative identity and status. Third, they acquired an object status. They were seen as passive victims and casualties of society incapable of acting on their own behalf and dependent on outside intervention, charity and social welfare.

The significant point about this discourse for local activists was that it proposed an interpretation of local residents' circumstances which denied them a role as autonomous subjects and emphasised their collective weakness and failure. The forms of identity associated with this discourse of poverty were perceived as disempowering and disabling for local individuals and for the community. Thus the process of categorising and distinguishing involved in the construction of social groups and subjectivities as 'poor' denied the possibility that local people might change or improve their circumstances through their own efforts and actions. Instead, they were positioned as the passive victims of social processes, which placed them in dependent and subordinate relationship with the rest of society.

In consequence, activists directed their own discursive effort towards challenging the stigmatisation and categorisation of local residents as a separate social group characterised by their subordinate status, their dependence and their incapacity. Some emphasised that the local community comprised a diverse range of interests and groups and that the problems or traits associated with the area were equally to be found outside of the area. They also played down the idea that local residents shared common interests and experiences which distinguished them from 'normal' people. In various ways they attempted to negotiate personal and social identities which challenged those imposed on them from outside and provided a more acceptable basis on which to make sense of and act upon their circumstances.

Among some activists, a quite different meaning of poverty was apparent which did not remove people's dignity and self-worth or their sense of themselves as actors able to influence their lives. It was largely free of the negative connotations associated with exclusive discourses and representations of poverty. This more 'inclusive' discourse was employed when speaking about poverty as a social condition or process affecting people with whom the speaker identified. Describing people as poor in this sense did not locate them within a separate social category of poor people. The forms of self-identification established through this discourse were ones which emphasised the sense of pride, worth, purpose, dignity and confidence which developed among people in poverty. It drew attention to the active role of people in maintaining and improving their welfare, their ability to manage and overcome the difficulties they faced and their positive outlook and plans to improve their situation in the future.

Thus activists who claimed that poverty existed in the area, evoked a quite different set of identities and meanings in relation to local people's lives. Their accounts constructed a positive sense of community which emphasised the collective values, resourcefulness, shared identity and coping ability of local people. They highlighted the value of their own forms of organisation and welfare in dealing with and overcoming circumstances of systematic disadvantage. In this respect, they sometimes drew upon a notion of the 'traditional working-class community', emphasising the qualities of mutual protection, self-help and resourcefulness. When they referred to local people as poor they clearly did not mean a dependent category of poor people, shut out of society and hopelessly overwhelmed by problems. Instead they employed a discourse on poverty which emphasised the importance of the community in providing a positive sense of membership, group identification and social inclusion.

Poverty discourse and poverty research

In the course of this thesis, I have considered a number of issues concerning the way in which poverty is interpreted, applied and understood in different social contexts and its meaning for those individuals and groups identified as poor. However, in this small study I have been able only to scratch the surface of what might constitute a much wider area of enquiry. It is clearly difficult to make generalisations from a small-scale study based on a total of less than 35 interviews. Time constraints also meant that a number of interesting issues that emerged in the study did not receive sufficient analysis and remained undeveloped. There would clearly be some benefit in extending the research to other groups of the population in order to assess whether the views expressed by respondents in this study can be generalised more widely. Research involving a larger sample and different groups might consider in greater depth the question of how poverty is perceived and conceptualised as a social problem and the role of poverty discourse in shaping ideas and attitudes towards those identified as poor.

Much poverty debate centres on the definition of poverty as an absolute or relative condition and on the level of income, deprivation or material resources taken to define poverty as an objective condition. However, it was the understanding of poverty in terms of agency, identity and moral adequacy that emerged in this study. Of particular significance was the fact that poverty was conceptualised not simply as

a matter of material deprivation, but as a condition of demoralisation and hopelessness associated with an inability to cope with material shortage. Poverty was regarded as a moral category not in the sense that individuals were blamed for their failure; respondents clearly recognised the social and structural causes of poverty rather than blaming individuals. It was a moral issue in the sense that the avoidance of poverty was perceived as a function of the individual's coping ability and strength of character and therefore as an indication of moral worthiness.

Those interviewed in the study were fully aware of the gap between their own living standards and those of other people. They did not deny or seek to hide their comparative lack of material welfare. They did, however, resist the imputation of difference in the sphere of moral or personal competence. They presented their lives in ways which stressed their continued scope for action and their coping abilities and skills in managing on a low income. The sense of being able to have an impact on one's circumstances was clearly important to maintaining an acceptable identity and self-conception. It was through demonstrating their ability to cope, to retain their respect and dignity, to overcome the disadvantages that they faced in bringing up their children and so on, that they asserted their personal capability and moral worthiness. In this way, they retained their self-respect and pride, in spite of the difficult conditions that they faced.

Community-based activity and discourses on poverty

The study found that involvement in community-based activity was also interpreted by reference to the themes of agency and identity. For local activists, community-based activity was understood primarily as identity-constructing activity. A principal aim was to establish an acceptable identity and an explanation of local people's lives which gave them an active role in the enhancement of their welfare. Rationales for community action took two forms. In some accounts, local activity provided an opportunity for people to rid themselves of the negative identity and stigma associated with a poor community and an exclusive discourse of poverty. For others, community activity embraced a positive conception of community in conjunction with a more inclusive discourse on poverty.

Those activists who identified the community in relation to an exclusive discourse on poverty saw community action as concerned with promoting local services to meet

particular social needs. Implicit in the task of improving people's living conditions and well-being was the aim of enhancing their self-respect, their identity and status and their moral worthiness. These activists saw themselves as a small minority acting upon a largely passive community. The majority of local residents were seen as having no strong sense of common identity or commitment to collective action. The community was viewed as the 'object' to be worked on, modified and improved through various forms of intervention which would promote individual empowerment. Thus community activity was directed towards establishing forms of provision which addressed the specific needs, problems and deprivations of individuals and groups in the locality in ways which might allow them to bridge the gap between their living conditions and those of other people.

For those who identified poverty in the local community by reference to an inclusive discourse, community action was concerned with the promotion of strategies which would empower local residents as social agents and citizens. A strong sense of community identity, mutual aid and support was assumed to exist among local people because of their shared experience of financial precariousness and vulnerability to poverty. This common experience provided the basis for positive responses at the level of the community and forms of involvement which enabled people to maintain their pride and self-respect. This favoured forms of community organisation which attempted to blur the line between helpers and users, to ensure wide access and active participation and to encourage forms of collective identity.

For these community activists, the meaning and significance of community activity lay in the promotion of an alternative social and moral framework for interpreting local people's experience and circumstances. Poverty was re-conceptualised in terms that stressed the power, rights, social bonds and active forms of coping among local residents, rather than dwelling on their material shortage and social deprivation. The relationship between community activity and poverty was expressed less in terms of the hardships and deprivations endured by local people and more as a concern to free people from the constraints of various social processes and practices on the realisation of their plans and strategies for improving their conditions. Emphasis was shifted away from the negative aspects of people's conditions on to the development of their resourcefulness and capabilities, social relations and networks and coping strategies and abilities.

This contrasted with the approach to social provision constructed through an exclusive discourse on poverty, based on identifying and separating those who fell within certain categories associated with failure or inadequacy. Such provision undermined the dignity of recipients by reducing them to a problem group, assigning them an inferior status and reducing their capacity and will to help themselves. It was the view of many people in the study that social assistance was forthcoming only to those who had exhausted their personal resources and capacities to help themselves. Such assistance rendered people helpless and dependent by identifying need only in relation to those who fell within categories associated with incapacity and a loss of agency. Those who remained capable of helping themselves were not eligible for assistance which might support their efforts to sustain themselves through their own strategies and actions.

Poverty discourse

The accounts of those interviewed in the study reveal a flow of ideas linking definitions of poverty as a material condition, various social and cultural representations of poverty and the common experiences of people identified as poor. It suggests that the process of identifying individuals and groups as poor takes place in a social and historical context in which particular meanings are attached to the condition of being poor. It therefore casts doubt on the extent to which definitions of poverty as an objective condition can be separated from the social meanings and representations of poor people conveyed through discourse.

The construction of poor people as a separate social category, found in the accounts of individuals and community activists, may reflect the dominance of a particular discourse which structures popular thinking about poverty. Much discussion on poverty centres on the identification and description of poor people as a separate social category. When we think of the dominant social and cultural ideas of poor people - starving people in the 'Third World', the destitute and homeless forced to beg in the streets, or the hopeless fate of unemployed families trapped on poor estates - all convey a sense of poor people as passive, dependent and detached from the mainstream of society. Within this framework, poor people are denied the status of subjects and are constructed simply as targets or objects for social action undertaken by welfare workers, charities and relief agencies.

One of the important characteristics of an exclusive discourse on poverty is the way it links the definition of poverty as a social and material condition to particular representations of what it means to be poor and to the identification of poor people as a social group. This implies that research which treats poverty as an analytical category cannot easily be divorced from the processes of social categorisation and exclusion inherent in these 'exclusive' discourses on poverty. The focus on establishing more objective definitions and categories of poverty in academic research may therefore have little impact in overcoming the reliance on popular stereotypes and cultural images in thinking about what it means to be poor. Regardless of whether poverty is defined in absolute or relative terms, if the overall effect is to draw a line between 'the poor' and the 'non-poor', then both definitions help sustain the impression that poor people exist as a distinct social group.

There is, for this reason, a sense in which defining people as poor or as socially excluded may reinforce the very sense of difference or separation that we seek to overcome. Similarly, case-studies and qualitative research which focus on the poor may convey the impression that poor people are an identifiable social group. Studies which set out to increase awareness and concern about poverty by documenting the forms of deprivation and hardship endured by those who are poor may confirm the belief that poor people exist as a distinct social group characterised by their inferior status, hopelessness and dependence. This raises an important question: can we use categories in relation to poverty which are not oppressive and disempowering or does the process of defining and categorising people as poor necessarily increase the sense that they are different?

This problem is not peculiar to the issue of poverty; it applies to the use of categories in general, especially where they have negative connotations. An important task in defining categories is to establish grounds for distinguishing those whose social, physical or material circumstances set them apart from the norm. However, one of the consequences of identifying people as homeless, elderly or disabled, etc. is to pinpoint an aspect of their situation that is assumed to exert a dominating influence on their lives and their well-being as a whole. One of the effects of categorisation is therefore to deny people's individuality, agency and autonomy, by submerging aspects of the subject's existence beneath the dominant image and characterisation of people in the category. Subjects are depicted in ways which conform to the particular social roles associated with the category - as poor person, homeless person, disabled, etc.

The process of categorisation becomes linked to a whole set of social meanings attached to these conditions so that the notion of difference is taken to extend to the characteristics and attributes of people themselves. Subjects deny that they are poor, homeless or disabled because they are reluctant to identify themselves as members of a category which sets them apart from 'normal' people. Not only that, the category denies them a role as individual agents by assigning them an identity and subjectivity that relates to popular images and stereotypes of people seen as poor, homeless or disabled. Individuals may accept that their material circumstances and living standards are different from other people's, but not that this has a determining and overwhelming effect on their actions and behaviour. Instead, they seek to assert their sense of being an 'ordinary' person sharing similar values, moral concerns and personal responsibilities as other people.

Those placed within these categories may develop their own oppositional discourses which offer a radical re-interpretation of the nature of the problems they experience. These may be linked to particular strategies which seek to redefine the terms in which the issue of poverty (or disability for that matter) is addressed. In particular, subjects may draw attention to the role of social practices and discourses in categorising individuals in ways which they experience as oppressive and divisive. These may evoke feelings of sympathy and concern towards those whose position is regarded as inferior. However, the overall effect is to distance the observer from the problem and to render it inevitable and insoluble. Their own discourses challenge traditional perspectives which focus on the inability of people to achieve some standard of life seen as normal. Their accounts stress the need for measures which do not require that people are identified as a separate social category.

In this respect there was evidence of a more radical discourse on poverty, which emphasised people's self-reliance and autonomy, among some community activists. This emergent discourse, based on a more inclusive perspective on poverty, offered a view of local people's circumstances that encouraged forms of self-definition, group identification and collective empowerment through community-based activity. Through this discourse, local activists set out to transform the terms of the debate, proposing strategies to tackle poverty which shifted emphasis on to kinds of personal resourcefulness, mutual support and coping strategies developed by those in poverty. In this sense, it contrasted with discourses that focused on the deprivations and

incapacities experienced by poor people and placed them within a discrete moral category.

Future research on poverty might seek to explore in greater detail how individual and collective strategies evolve as a response to the disempowering nature of exclusive discourses on poverty. This research would focus on experience-near understandings of poverty and look at people's own definitions and conceptions of well-being. It would examine how understandings derived from an inclusive discourse on poverty are linked to the development of particular strategies and actions among those identified as poor. It would also look at the role of discourse in promoting forms of group identification which increase the potential for collective action. Such an approach offers the possibility of developing other ways of thinking and talking about the experience of poverty which do not rely on definitions, conceptions and discourses which locate poverty as a problem of other people disconnected from our own lives.

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Appendix 1: Details of respondents interviewed in the study

List of respondents interviewed in the first part of the study

Jackie
Age: approx. 38-39
Place of residence: Milton.
Household situation: single parent mother with 3 older children still living at home, along with her daughter's fiancé and their young son.
Employment and income: unemployed, claiming income support.

Phyllis
Age: late 50s
Address: Milton
Household situation: Married, lives with her husband and foster children - her own children have left home.
Employment and income: works part-time; her husband has been forced to retire due to illness.

Mary
Age: 25
Address: Blackmuir
Household situation: Married, living with husband and daughter, aged nearly 3.
Employment and income: unemployed; husband is also unemployed due to long-term sickness. Presently claiming Income Support.

Alice
Age: 24 approx.
Address: Milton
Household situation: Living with male partner and son who is 2 years old.
Employment and income: unemployed and claiming Income Support; partner is employed and earns approx. £160 per week.

Kate
Age: approx. 33
Address: Milton.
Household situation: Single-parent mother with 4 children aged 5, 8, 12 and 14.
Employment and income: Unemployed and claims Income Support.

Maureen
Age: approx. 50-55
Address: Blackmuir
Household situation: lives alone.
Employment and income: unable to work due to illness. Invalidity benefit.

Robert
Age: 39
Address: Blackmuir
Household situation: Married, living with wife and 3 children aged 2, 3 and 8. Oldest son, aged 17, from previous marriage has just left home.

Employment and income: long-term unemployed. Claiming Income Support for himself and family.

Julie
Age: approx. 25
Address: Craiglea.
Household situation: married and lives with husband and 3 young children.
Employment and income: Employed on 3 part-time jobs. Husband also works full-time.

Paula
Age: late 30s
Address: Milton.
Household situation: single-parent household with 3 children aged 13, 12 and 7.
Employment and income: unemployed and claims Income Support. Occasionally works evenings in a local shop.

Ann
Age: early 40s
Address: Glenside.
Household situation: single-parent with two teenage children still living at home.
Employment and income: Employed full-time as an administrative assistant

Janice
Address: Blackmuir.
Age: early 30s
Household situation: single, lives alone.
Employment and income. Unemployed and claiming Income Support.

Eddie
Age: 35
Place of residence: Westwood
Household situation: Lives with partner and two young children.
Employment and income: employed full-time.

Lynne
Age: 37
Address: Craiglea
Household situation: Single-parent mother with 3 children aged 11, 13 and 15, one of whom is presently in care.
Employment and income: Unemployed and claims Income Support. Small extra declared income through part-time work.

Ruth
Age: approx. 35
Address: Milton
Household situation: Living alone.
Employment and income: unemployed and claiming Income Support

Fiona
Age: approx. 26
Address: Milton
Household situation: single-parent mother with one daughter, under 5.
Employment and income: unemployed and claiming Income Support.

Alex
Age: 33
Address: Blackmuir.
Household situation: lives with girlfriend and 5 year-old daughter.
Employment and income: Both unemployed and claiming Income Support.

List of local Activists interviewed in the second part of the study

Pat
Place of residence: Blackmuir
Age group: 45-55
Employed full-time in local community organisation
Community involvement:
Blackmuir Arts and Drama Association - employed as project manager
Royston Park Anti-Poverty Strategy - local delegate
Royston Park Urban Programme - committee member
Blackmuir Forum - committee member

Moira
Place of residence: Milton
Age group: 55-65
Employed part-time in local community organisations
Community involvement:
Royston Park Playschemes Association - employed part-time
Milton Pensioners Group - volunteer helper and session work
Royston Park Anti-Poverty Strategy - local delegate
Royston Park Community Alliance - activist
Milton Centre After-School club

Margaret
Place of residence: Blackmuir
Age group: 45-55
Not employed, registered disabled
Community involvement:
Blackmuir Community Housing Association - member of management committee
Blackmuir Arts and Drama Association - chair of management committee
Blackmuir Tenants Association - activist
Blackmuir Anti-Racist Campaign - activist
Royston Park Anti-Poverty Strategy - local delegate
Women and Children's Project - member of management committee
Royston Park Urban Programme -
Disability Alliance - activist
Blackmuir Forum - committee member

Helen
Place of residence: Glenside
Age group: 45-55
Employed full-time in local community group
Community involvement:
Credit Union - employed full-time
Glenside Housing Co-operative - member of local management committee
Glenside Neighbourhood Centre - member of local management committee

Irene
Place of residence: Milton
Age group: 55-65
Employed outside of the area
Community involvement:
Royston Park Community Alliance - activist

Blackmuir Playscheme - volunteer helper
Milton Pensioners Club - volunteer helper
Credit Union - committee member and volunteer

Lorna
Place of residence: Glenside
Age group: 55-65
Employed in local community organisation
Community involvement:
Glenside Churches Network - employed as project worker
Milton and Glenside playscheme - volunteer helper
Milton and Westwood Youth Group - volunteer helper
Royston Park Anti-Poverty Strategy - local delegate
Royston Adventure Playground - volunteer
Westwood Elderly Club - chair of management committee
Local Advice Centre - member of management committee
Mobile Creche - member of management committee

Marion
Place of residence: Milton
Age group: 35-45
Employed part-time in local community organisation
Community involvement:
Royston park Food coop - employed part-time
Royston Park Childcare Group - member of working group
Royston Park Community Health Project - member of management committee
Royston Park Against Hospital Closures - activist
Royston Park Anti-Poverty Strategy - local delegate

Norma
Place of residence: Westwood
Age group: 55-65
Employed full-time in local community project
Community involvement:
Royston Park Elderly Project - employed as project manager
Westwood Avenue Tenants Group - activist
Royston Park Community Health Project - chair of management committee

Graham
Place of residence: Craiglea
Age group: 35-45
Employed outside of the area
Community involvement:
Craiglea Community Council - council member
Craiglea Neighbourhood Centre - member of working Group
Royston Park Urban Programme - committee member

Cathy
Place of residence: Westwood
Age group: 25-35
Employed in local community organisation
Lone-parents support group - employed as project worker
Royston Park Childcare Group - member of working group
Women's Employment and Training Project - member of management committee

Tommy
Place of residence: Blackmuir
Age group: 25-35
Unemployed
Community involvement:
Blackmuir Anti-Racist Campaign - activist
Blackmuir Unemployed Group - activist
Blackmuir Tenants Association - activist

Jill
Place of residence: Westwood
Age group: 25-35
Unemployed - some paid session work
Community involvement:
Royston Park Childcare Group - member of working group
Single-parents support group - volunteer
Westwood Community Centre - volunteer and session worker

Alan
Place of residence: Craiglea
Age group: 35-45
Unemployed
Community involvement:
Community Bus Group - volunteer co-ordinator
Craiglea Community Council - council member

Liz
Place of residence: Glenside
Age group: 45-55
Employed part-time in local community organisation
Community involvement:
Milton and Glenside playscheme - employed part-time
Glenside Neighbourhood Centre - member of local management committee

Eve
Place of residence: Westwood
Age group: 25-35
Employed in local community organisation
Community involvement:
Linked Work and Training Project - employed as project worker
Women's Employment and Training Project - member of management committee
Westwood Women's Group - activist

Alison
Place of residence: Milton
Age group: 25-35
Employed in local community organisation
Community involvement:
Mobile creche - employed part-time as project worker
Royston Park Childcare Group - member of working group

Sally
Place of residence: Blackmuir
Age group: 35-45
Employed outside of the area

Community involvement:
Royston Park Community Health Project - volunteer
Royston Park Against Hospital Closures - activist

Breakdown of characteristics of local activists

Gender
Male: 3
Female: 14

Age groups
25 - 35: 5
35 - 45: 4
45 - 55: 4
55 - 65: 4

Residence
Blackmuir 4
Milton 4
Glenside 3
Westwood 4
Craiglea 2

Areas covered in terms of main involvement of activists
Blackmuir 3 (Pat, Margaret, Tommy)
Milton 3 (Moira, Irene, Marion)
Glenside 2 (Helen, Liz)
Westwood 3 (Jill, Eve, Alison)
Craiglea 2 (Alan, Graham.)

General 4 (Sally, Norma, Cathy, Lorna)

Appendix 2. Interview guides used in the study

Interview guide 1: The personal experience of poverty.

1. View of the area
How and when did you move here
Good/bad points of the area - local services, facilities, people, housing, drugs, crime.
How has it changed over years? Improved or worsened.
What problems and constraints do people face here?
Are most people poor - in what sense - lack of jobs or skills, motivation, etc.?
Is poverty a long-term experience for many people?

2. Ties to the area
Family, friends here
Time spent in and out of area, socialising, working, etc.
Any involvement in local groups, the community - how started? why? what benefits?
Like the area or prefer to move? What stops them moving?

3. Present situation - work, family, household, income, etc.
Employment situation? Income?
Standard of living? Compared to others and to times in the past.
Household circumstances, children, other people in the household.
How well or difficult to manage on their income? Any other sources of money.
How manage their money - budgeting, saving, putting aside money, loans, debt, arrears, borrowing, help from people.
Examples - Xmas, large items of expenditure, holidays, furnishing, etc.

4. Employment history
Since left school to now, including periods of unemployment.
Skills, training, experience, qualifications.
Hours, wages, conditions, prospects and job satisfaction.
How did you find work and why you left jobs.
What like/miss most about work

5. Household changes
When first left home, where, why.
Setting up home - partners, children, etc.
Finding accommodation, how furnished
Housing moves, where and what reasons - jobs, children , relationships

6. Changing circumstances and living standards
When did you felt best and worst off and why, what was your situation at that time.
What important events, crises, decisions had a big impact on your living standards?
How managed through difficult times, who helped, what resources available?
How long did these hard times last and how do they overcome them?

7. Experience of poverty
Do you regard yourself as poor at present time or at any time in the past?
If yes, how long did it last, what it was like, what caused it, how did you feel?
What keeps people (you or others) in poverty and how do they get out of it.
How define poverty? Who is poor?

8. Present and future

How do you feel about your present situation, living standards, life style?
Worries and fears and concerns - future needs, expenditure, etc.
Plans and hopes for the future and their confidence/optimism of achieving them.
How would you like to improve/change their situation
Do you feel in a position to improve your circumstances?

Interview guide 2: The views of local community activists

1. Experience of living in Royston Park and perception of the major concerns and issues in the area

How long have you lived in the area?
How long have you been involved in community groups and activities?
Which groups and in what capacity?

The area.
How has the area changed over that time? Improvement or decline?
What positive things do you see?
What in your view are the major concerns and issues for people living in the area?
How does the reputation of the area match the reality? Are things improving?
Is the area looked upon in a negative way by local people?

The community.
How has the high turnover of people in Royston Park affected the community?
Is there a strong sense of community in the area? How has it changed over the years?
When people talk about 'community' what do they mean? What does it mean to you?
What level of local involvement in the community?
In what sense is there a community? Do local people see themselves as part of a community?

Poverty in the area
Would you describe Royston Park as a poor area?
Are some/most people in Royston Park experiencing poverty? Which people?
What are the main reasons for poverty in the area?
Do you think that poverty has increased here in the last few years?
Are people becoming trapped in poverty in the area? Is there an underclass?

2. Experience of community action and involvement in different local groups

The projects you are involved in.
How and why was the project first set up (by local people or from outside)?
What particular needs and concerns did it seek to address?
How funded?
What is your role within it?
How it operates, e.g. volunteers/activists/paid staff; services and activities; and groups targeted?
How does it publicise itself and how widely known is it?
How has it changed over time (e.g. aims and objectives, funding, resources, activities, stability, turnover of activists, paid staff, grown in size and scope)?
How successful?

Local control and decision-making.
What are the different roles of paid staff, volunteers, active members and users?
How are decisions made?
How effectively do local people exercise control and influence in the project, e.g. through the management committee and by their direct involvement in the project?
What is your relationship with other local projects ?
How has the project been affected by funding, paid staff, expansion, etc.?
To what extent does the project represent the interests and views of local people?

The impact of local projects.
What do you think these kinds of projects are achieving for local people?
Which local projects and groups do you think have been most effective and why?
Are local services better run by local people or by professional staff?
Do you feel that too much of the responsibility for providing services in the area is being shifted onto the community and local volunteers?
How do you see the future of these community projects?

3. The role of the local community groups in combating poverty and tackling the problems of the area

Local involvement.
There is a lot of talk about the need to involve the community in decisions and initiatives to combat problems in the area, what do you think this means in practice?
Is involvement in community activity increasing?
Are there some groups or interests that still seem to be excluded or ignored?
What should be the respective roles and powers of local people and public authorities?
What can reasonably be expected from the community in terms of local involvement and participation?

Combating poverty through community-based strategies.
Is it important to have an anti-poverty strategy for the area as a whole?
What things should be emphasised within this strategy?
What impact can community organisations have on poverty?
Do these projects manage to reach the poorest and most needy in the community?
To what extent do you think the problems associated with poverty in the area can successfully be tackled by local community organisations?

4. Personal experience, benefits and reflections on community-based projects

How have you gained personally from your involvement in community activity (e.g. skills, knowledge, confidence, social enjoyment, opportunities, etc.)?
Why have you got involved in the community, what do you seek to achieve?
What lessons have you learnt in your experience of community involvement?
What do you think local people can achieve, realistically, through their involvement in community-based projects in the area? E.g.

- help combat poverty in the area
- enhance the quality of life and improve local conditions
- help people to cope better with conditions of poverty and prevent the worst excesses of deprivation and disadvantage
- give (some) local people a greater influence over resources and decisions affecting the area
- provide essential services which meet local needs (whose, the most disadvantaged, how)?

What more could or should be done to improve things for local people?
What really needs to be done to tackle poverty in the area?